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Domesticity and Religion: Women in Italian American Literature and Culture of the 1930s

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DOMESTICITY AND RELIGION: WOMEN IN ITALIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE OF THE 1930S

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Madeleine Kirkpatrick

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ABSTRACT

The lives of Italian American women of the early twentieth century have been documented in fragments in histories of immigration and in the literature written by the children of first-wave immigrants. This documentation often leaves an incomplete picture of how Italian women lived and moved in their new American context in the first decades of the twentieth century. This thesis examines Pietro Di Donato's portrayal of Annunziata in his 1939 novel *Christ in Concrete* alongside the journals of Elba F. Gurzau, a real-life, second-generation Italian woman living in New York City during the 1930s. By holding these women up next to each other, this thesis shows how the confines of domesticity hindered the first-generation of Italian American immigrant women and left them unable to preserve the homeland values and traditions they were tasked with handing down, whereas the educational freedom and literacy attained by many members of the second generation allowed for women like Gurzau to effectively promote Italian culture in America. Likewise, these women's relationships with Italo-Catholic religious practices determine the fluency with which they are able to interact and evolve in the New World. Annunziata is left, in both the domestic and religious realms, unable to find meaning and substance in her work because she is unable to recreate Italy in America. Elba Gurzau's ability to find harmony between the two cultures and her freedom to explore outside of Cultural Catholicism breathe life into her work and allow her to effectively bridge the gap between Old World Italy and a quickly modernizing America.

KEYWORDS: Italian-American, American literature, Italian language, women, modern literature, domesticity, religion, Catholicism

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INTRODUCTION

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, at least twenty million people left the Italian peninsula after a rocky national unification that resulted in extreme poverty for many Italians. Of that number, four million came to settle on American soil. Many in that group were single men looking for work, and around 30 percent of that initial number became *ritornati*, immigrants who returned to Italy after only a few years of hardship and strife in the New World (Salerno 1). Because United States immigration records do not specify the gender of each arrival, it is only possible to estimate how many of these Italian immigrants to America were women. We can assume, however, that tens of thousands of these immigrants were women who went on to live and die in anonymity until the following generations—usually their children or grandchildren—began to tell their stories. These stories shine a light on the roles of womanhood and motherhood and how these first-generation women of the early twentieth century not only shaped the lives of their children but shaped an entire culture and history. Although they were not the first to immigrate, the Italian women to come to America between the 1880s and the 1920s were members of the first major wave of Italian immigration and their experiences in the New World looked starkly different from those of their daughters, nieces, and granddaughters. The shift that occurred between the first and next generations was due not simply to an altered set of values and new opportunities but also to a change in how Italian Americans viewed their work in the US context. The first generation's need to bring Italy to America grew into the desire to integrate both cultures, thus creating a newer, more culturally inclusive context in which women could live, work, and find meaning. It was this shift that allowed changes for women within the specific realms of domesticity and religion.

This thesis defines the lifestyles and social environment in which women of the first generation lived and worked and how that environment changed for the second generation. To that end, any reference to the first generation applies specifically to members of the first major wave of Italian immigration between 1880 and 1920. References to the second generation will apply to those children who were born to this first generation. This means that there is no precise decade in which the second generation was born, but rather that their births occurred throughout the first couple decades of the twentieth century and they experienced, as children and young adults, all the vicissitudes of a rapidly modernizing nation.

Despite many of the same cultural expectations—expectations which commonly confined the first generation—the second generation was able to find liberation from domesticity and success in promoting Italianness in the New World. Practices and lifestyles that were rejected by the first generation out of habit and adherence to tradition were embraced by the second. In two generations, Italian American women evolved in and adapted to a country that was hostile to their nationality and unaccommodating to their gender. This thesis examines one fictional, first-generation Italian American woman along with her historical, second-generation counterpart in order to examine what shaped how these women operated within their Italian identity in America.

In the 1937 novel *Christ in Concrete,* Pietro Di Donato constructs a character who figures as the model of the first-generation Italian American woman: Annunziata, wife of Geremio and mother of Paul. Di Donato's novel centers around the work of men and is described by many scholars as a proletarian fiction, one that depicts the destruction wrought by capitalist production on the immigrant populations of New York City. In the novel, Geremio dies by industrial crucifixion in a building collapse. His large family is left with nothing, and his oldest son, Paul,

is forced to drop out of school and go to work to provide for his seven siblings and mother. Throughout the course of the novel, two other significant male figures in Paul's life, his Uncle Luigi and his godfather Nazone, are either injured or killed by dangerous work. The concept and ever-present force of work is personified, even deified by its rendering as "Job," an agency much like "God." Paul is constantly faced with challenges to his physical body as well as challenges to his Catholic faith and traditions. Annunziata, meanwhile, tries to be the steady sounding board for Paul's confusion and the chaos around them, despite the fear and confusion that she is feeling. Di Donato made clear in a 1987 interview with Dorothee von Huene-Greenberg that *Christ in Concrete* is heavily autobiographical. Along with multiple mentions of his father and godfather, Di Donato refers several times to his mother and her presence in his young life. He says that throughout the years depicted in *Christ in Concrete*, he was extremely close with his mother and relied on her as a source of strength and comfort (Huene-Greenberg 43). Annunziata, by the author's account, is the fictionalized characterization of his real-life mother. In fact, throughout this interview, he draws no distinction between the two. I highlight this point to suggest the value of using Annunziata as a prototypical Italian American mother and first-generation woman. Because these first-generation women generally were unable to write down their own stories, fictional depictions of them such as Di Donato's serve as some of the most intimate pictures of their day-to-day lives. Di Donato's depiction the life and work of his mother through Annunziata is the subject of the subsequent two chapters. Ultimately, her outward role is one of silence and of maintaining the family's well-being, while inside she feels stranded in an unfamiliar and unforgiving context, without a husband, and struggling to find purpose.

At the very beginning of the novel, Geremio looks at his children, who are resting in the early, dim light of morning as he leaves his apartment on the Lower East Side of Manhattan and

calls them “the prolificacy of his blood” (27). He includes his wife Annunziata in the image not as a coworker in this procreative labor but as another offshoot of himself. The mother of his children, whom he obviously loves and cherishes, gets little credit for the “prolificacy of his blood.” From the beginning, Annunziata is stripped of agency, of power distinct from her husband’s. But once Geremio dies and leaves his widow and eight children behind right as the Great Depression is approaching, Annunziata’s role as the mother becomes something more than caretaker and homemaker. The woman who begins the narrative as a buxom, hearty Italian wife who cooks good food and manages a warm home for Geremio becomes a woman reliant on her young son for income and chronically searching to resurrect what once gave her work meaning. In the midst of her feelings of emptiness and confusion, Annunziata must manage her home, provide her own source of income, sustain her family, play host to her community of other Italian American families, and preserve her ethnic and religious culture in her new context.

Di Donato’s relatively peripheral attention to Annunziata and her work helps illuminate certain familial dynamics and roles in both Italian and Italian American culture. Annunziata is a nurturer, provider, and spiritual leader. She passes down culture and traditional Italian dialect to her children, much like real first-generation Italian American women were expected to do. Annunziata, in no uncertain way, holds her family together, even while the men in the novel drive the narrative. Many studies of historical Italian American immigrant women make it clear that Annunziata’s actions in the text and the expectations put upon her are not wholly unique, but rather typical of the culture in and for which she was written.

Elba Farabegoli Gurzau, in many ways a model of an independent, career-minded second-generation Italian American woman, was born in New York City in 1909 to Italian parents, Francesco (Frank) Farabegoli and Virginia Bimbi Farabegoli. Gurzau traveled back and

forth between New York and Italy for much of her childhood and teenage years, before earning her Bachelor of Science from New York University in 1932 (Sutton). For the rest of her life, Gurzau worked in education, teaching Italian and English language classes in New York City. She was also a founding member of the Folk Festival Council in New York City and the Italian Folk Arts Federation of America, which hosted events and dance productions with the aim of preserving and spreading world culture, primarily Italian culture in the United States (Sutton). In the guide to the Gurzau papers at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, archivist Daniel Sutton sums up Gurzau's career by saying, "she worked for the YWCA and Nationalities Service Center to help recent immigrants bridge the gap between their native culture and that of America. International folk dance and the teaching of English were her main tools" (1). Gurzau was unmarried in her twenties, a rare situation for many first-generation women, yet increasingly common of their daughters. She was educated, professionally ambitious, business-minded, well-read, non-Catholic, and bilingual: all factors that distinguish her from Di Donato's Annunziata.

Surveying Gurzau's personal papers, which deal extensively with issues of domesticity and religion, this thesis puts a real-life Italian immigrant woman in conversation with her fictional counterpart in Donato's *Christ in Concrete*. By comparing the sphere of Italian women's influence portrayed in this widely-read novel to the sphere of influence in which Italian women actually moved, the focus of this thesis will be on these two women's domestic and religious identities and functions. Because Gurzau interacted widely with other Italian American women, her diaries and letters help illuminate the situation of this social group from her perspective. However, the distinction between generations plays a key role in the argument. There is a massive shift in how these women moved within their domestic and religious realms based on whether or not they were able to reconcile Italian identity and culture with American

identity and culture. While Annunziata lived her years in America trying to force her surroundings to stay perfectly Italian and keep intact the Italy she left, Gurzau was able to preserve her Italian identity and values while still working to remove obstacles separating the two cultures. It was this kind of work—work that helped unify Italian and American culture—which enabled second-generation women like Gurzau to emerge into a world of public possibilities, ideas, and identities.

Chapter One explores how Gurzau exemplifies, in contrast to Annunziata, the freedom that existed for immigrant women outside the bounds of the domestic realm. Gurzau's full education and grasp of the English language provided her with social and professional opportunities that were simply not open to many first-generation Italian American immigrant women like Di Donato's mother. Chapter Two will explore how both generations experienced the desire for a genuinely felt faith; however, both women interacted with faith practices in different ways, based largely on how much they were able or allowed to engage intellectually with different faith systems to see beyond cultural Catholicism. While Annunziata's identity is, in many ways, rooted in the Catholic faith and her religious responsibilities, Gurzau was able to venture outside of many Italian traditions, including cultural Catholicism, and explore new faith systems. As a second-generation Italian American woman, Gurzau was Americanized and secularized by American educational institutions, and she eventually let go of many of the traditions connected with her Italian heritage, the same things that Annunziata fights so hard to keep Paul from abandoning.

Beyond these two primary sources of *Christ in Concrete* and the Gurzau Papers, this thesis also deals widely with scholarship on domesticity, Italian and English language propagation, Catholicism, and the spiritual roles of women in Italian culture. Many scholarly

sources deal with Italian American motherhood specifically rather than a more broadly defined categorization of womanhood, but in the period considered here, motherhood was often understood as an essential dimension of Italian womanhood. A majority of sources will be discussed in greater detail in their respective chapters, but here I will touch on a couple of the broader topics and scholars whose voices will contribute to this thesis as a whole.

First, Mangione and Morreale write extensively on the plight of Italian Americans in their *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience* (1992). Their work is used here to provides a historical backdrop for first- and second-generation Italian American women like Annunziata and Gurzau. *La Storia* also shapes my account in the first chapter of the Italy that late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century immigrants departed. But Mangione and Morreale's narrative does not focus on the life and experiences of the women who emigrated. My study will, in part, seek to flesh out these women's side of this history that Mangione and Morreale write.

Lorett Treese's work on Italian American women in this period enables the expansion of Mangione and Morreale's ideas to focus on gender. Treese's work looks specifically at the lives of Italian American women during the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century is Lorett Treese. She explores broadly the Italian American concept of motherhood and the responsibilities and expectations accompanied by that station. Though Treese does not address the spiritual responsibilities of Italian immigrants, she is able to provide a well-rounded look at family structures in Italian culture. Treese also looks at the Italian Mothers' Clubs that existed during this time period. The New York City Italian American Mothers' Club of the 1930s and 1940s, started by Elba F. Gurzau in New York City, was a way to help women "while they willingly made the transition from Italian women living in America to Italian-American women"

(25). Despite Gurzau's being intimately connected with these clubs, they are mentioned very little in her journals and correspondence. Treese's work provides a primary reference point on Italian American female life in the 1930s, specifically as it pertains to Gurzau's life and writings. Though the Gurzau papers shine only a dim light on the club, its activities, and its membership, Treese's work lends insight into the reality of Italian American women specifically and helps to explain some key differences between first- and second-generation women.

American immigrant women's domestic and religious roles in the late nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century come to light within the context of post-unification Italy. When the unification of Italy took place between 1860 and 1870, it deepened the economic chasm that had long existed between the ruling class and the peasant class. The people who lived in the Mezzogiorno, a section comprising many of the southern regions (including Abruzzi, Molise, and Calabria), were most adversely affected by the unification, and therefore made up a large majority of those who emigrated to America in the 1880s through the 1920s. These first-generation immigrants worked in construction, as seen in *Christ in Concrete*, as well as in the arts, the food industry, etc. Generally, they occupied jobs which required manual labor deemed too dangerous or intensive for middle-class, native born Americans and the upper-classes. They eventually created for themselves in places like New York City a subculture that mixed their own heritage with the culture, language, and ideals of their new home. They brought with them from their home country cuisines, family structures, and religious practices that, they felt, must endure in order to ensure the survival of their legacy. Bearing most of the burden of these preservation efforts were the young girls, women, and mothers of these Italian American families. Treese explains just how much weight the role of the mother, specifically, held in the minds of Italians, going as far as to say that "virtually every historian who has studied the subject

agrees that the Italian family was the only meaningful social institution in the Mezzogiorno culture from which most southern Italian immigrants came" (26). And of this family, the mother was the center. These family units were completely loyal and essentially unshakable. The first-generation woman was given sole responsibility for the spiritual well-being of her children and community. She had to maintain the Italian heritage or, she felt, it would be lost. The daughters of these women, nevertheless, were able to grow into different roles, redefining their identity as Italian women and Americans. Factors discussed in greater detail later on such as education and general Americanization in schools and churches led to a generation of Italian American women who were emotionally liberated from the responsibilities of cultural and religious preservation that their mothers carried. These two generations of women are often depicted in literature as they lived in actuality. By looking closely at the fictional first-generation Italian American woman, Annunziata, and her real second-generation counterpart, Elba Gurzau, it is possible to see how these Italian American women held the weight of two countries on their shoulders and still found ways to reach outside themselves and their social confines to create a culture and literature that endure and help enrich America to this day.

Both of these women, despite being of two different generations and very distinct economic and educational backgrounds, struggled with the same questions regarding their inherited religion: Catholicism. As Annunziata's story shows, the inability of a woman to explore work or interests outside of domesticity and the lack of safety to question cultural Catholicism produced a life full of fear and confinement. Because this situation existed and hindered so many of the first-generation women, the extent to which Italianness could be promoted outside of the home and in the larger community or culture was limited. For the second generation, as seen through Gurzau, the ability to explore outside of and question both

domesticity and religion allowed her, even as a young woman, to move within American culture and help other immigrants thrive, as well as enrich and promote the legacy of Italian values and traditions within the larger American culture.

CHAPTER 1: ITALIAN WOMEN AND DOMESTICITY: WORK, LITERACY, AND LANGUAGE

There is an image, easily conjured by many of us, of a woman in the home, surrounded by children, cooking meals for a husband who returns from work weary and sore, which seems to transcend many Western cultures and time periods. This archetypal woman is a safe place for her children and husband and is warm with her neighbors. Her home is an open door to the community, a place of respite and comfort. She is a Vestal Virgin who forever keeps the fire burning.

For centuries, this has been the ideal against which women of western cultures have been measured. Only in recent decades has this standard been seen for what it often is: a source of frustration and hurt for the women it confines. During the early twentieth century, the domestic expectations put upon Italian American women and young girls were an amalgam of American and Italian feminine ideals. In fact, Italian culture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems to have put special emphasis on the female's roles as wife, mother, and home keeper. This chapter explores domestic realities for first- and second-generation Italian American women. By first by looking at the cultural landscape in which women like Annunziata existed, and then by examining how and why these social constructs changed for second-generation women like Elba Gurzau it is possible to see that it was the impossibility of perfectly transplanting Italy to America that ended up leeched meaning from the domestic work of the first generation and cutting their legacy short. Subjects such as traditional Italian family structures, work, education, and English-language proficiency are given special attention in order to make clear that these two women and the generations they each represent were faced with similar frustrations and

expectations. Annunziata is confined to realms of domesticity and lives her life unable to integrate her Italian identity with an American identity. Gurzau, however, was given the necessary tools through education to go outside the home and work towards a sense of harmony between the two cultures in her community.

Italian and American Views Of Motherhood

The concept of motherhood was central to an Italian woman's life, but it also played a primary role in how American culture functioned during the twentieth century. Because Italians were and are so widely Catholic, their views on the role of mothers are largely influenced by their adoration of the Virgin Mary. Motherhood was considered a holy station, replete with opportunities and responsibilities for shaping the next generation. In the Italian mind, the role of motherhood, more than any other, ultimately ensured the longevity of Italianness in America.

In mainstream American culture, motherhood was often seen in a somewhat similar light, though often without the spiritual dimensions added to it. M.J. Patterson and Romayne Smith Fullerton's work gives a historical picture of this general attitude towards the role of American motherhood during the 1930s. Like this thesis, Patterson and Romayne's work is focused on the early twentieth century: a time period during which the first major wave of first-generation Italian women was raising second-generation young women. Patterson and Fullerton use published materials such as magazine articles and stories from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to track how motherhood was viewed and how it shifted during the social upheaval and drastic change of those decades. These magazines defined culture for many women and functioned as the measuring stick by which they assessed their own work, efficacy, and even identity. These magazines told them that their role as mothers was—or should be—steadfast and unchanging,

ultimately leaving little room for women to grow and evolve. Patterson and Fullerton write that "what is most striking is that both the articles and the accompanying advertisements held to a uniform, prescriptive, and narrow definition of maternal roles, even while the public sphere and women's emerging place within it, changed radically" (5). These authors go on to quote William Chafe in saying that "people in North America largely rejected the idea that women should depart from the domestic sphere" (6). This rejection, coupled with the persistence of Italian social norms and traditions, ended up trapping the first-generation Italian American woman within two sets of restrictive walls. Even if she were to reject and break out of one, she would still be contained by the other.

Annunziata as a First-Generation Italian American Woman

When asked by Huene-Greenberg about his reaction to his father's death, Di Donato says, "of course, my mother was my inspiration, she was the strong one. She was my tower" (43). His mother, who is depicted through Annunziata in his novel, was to Di Donato a central figure in his life and in *Christ in Concrete*. She was, according to Di Donato, illiterate yet imaginative; she was, like the other *paesanos*, superstitious while remaining dedicated to her cultural roots and inherited religion. By talking of the centrality of his mother in his own life, Di Donato makes it clear that Annunziata's role in *Christ in Concrete* cannot be ignored. In fact, his emphasis on his mother hints that Annunziata may just be one of the most complex and key characters in his novel.

When looking at Annunziata's life in *Christ in Concrete* and her role in Geremio's and Paul's lives, it is easy to gloss over what may be one of the single most important indicators of Annunziata's attitude towards her role as an immigrant mother and her frustrations with her lot:

her desire throughout the story to reach out and speak to Geremio in the afterlife through a medium. The implications of this scene reach into both the domestic and religious aspects of Italian American women's lives. Annunziata's episode with the medium shows, above anything, dissatisfaction with the limitations of her own world and realm of influence. Without her husband, she is rendered impotent in American society. Preserving a home and nurturing an environment that acts as a base from which the working men of her life go out to make money and develop some kind of success in the New World is what gave these first-generation women some sense of influence on their environment. With the death of Geremio, her sense of power in domesticity takes its first hit. Her later having to send her young son into the workforce in order to provide for her other children makes Annunziata feel that her work as a homemaker and a provider of safety and shelter is negated, for her son is in danger and they are all without comfort. Her effort to connect to Geremio even after his death shows a desperation for meaning and substance to be injected back into her life and role as the domestic keeper. In a moment of deep emotion, Annunziata asks Paul to speak for her: "…My mama wants to know if papa… is happy" (115). This question alone shows that Annunziata feels that if she can, in some way, keep Geremio alive and happy, she will still be supporting him and her home in a way that makes sense to her.

This scene with the medium acts as a counter scene to the wedding feast, which I will examine in greater detail in the coming pages. Luigi and Cola's wedding is the primary example of Annunziata's domestic work's having the desired effect: her guests feel transported to Italy and are, momentarily, free from the weight of survival in the New World. If Annunziata's labor on behalf of Cola and Luigi is able, in many ways, to enliven a sense of Italy in America for the paesanos, then her consultation with the medium shows that when Annunziata is unable to

construct a context in which her work is appreciated and her achievements are quantifiable, she is left frantically trying to bring back the person for whom her work was always meaningful: her husband. If she can communicate with Geremio and in some way know that he is happy and safe, even in the afterlife, Annunziata's work will have been successful. This connection and validation seem to be what she is longing for.

Annunziata's powerlessness to control the world around her is the foundation of much of her existence in the novel; it is also something that was felt by a majority of first-generation Italian immigrant women. Annunziata represents a woman striving to meet the standards of successful womanhood in America though her death at the end of the novel leaves readers wondering whether or not she is ultimately successful. Because Annunziata's story is fictional, though based on a real-life woman, this portion of my analysis also includes the use of historical scholarship to surmise Annunziata's past as an Italian immigrant woman born around the turn of the century.

Though Di Donato's full novel was published in 1939, its story is set beginning in the late 1920s. During this period, an Italian girl's life was generally propelled towards a future of being a wife and a mother. In the Italian family's mind, females were valuable, vital, and cherished, but really only as mothers and homemakers. Treese cites historian Richard Gambino's proposition that "while the father was the 'head' of the family, the mother was its 'center'" (27). Likewise, one elderly Italian woman is cited by Mangione and Morreale as saying, "I can't understand why any Italian girl would want to become American, there is no real respect for her in an American house. In the Italian home a woman is the heart and soul" (336). In other words, the father, or the man of the family, made the decisions and led the family, while the mother was responsible for making the will of the father happen logistically as well as maintaining a stable, comfortable home life.

Women in the Italian home may have enjoyed more admiration than the average American women of the time, but this respect extended only so far as the home walls. Once she left that space, she was diminished to a role no more powerful than a child's. This is not to say that all Italian American mothers resented their station; in fact, Elizabeth G. Messina, in interviews conducted with a group of Italian immigrant women at a senior center during the 1990s in New York City, identifies a prominent theme in her interviews with the daughters of these first-generation women as being the pleasure their mothers found in their work: "My mother worked hard. Our house was always clean. She was a devoted mother. She cooked, cleaned, pressed shirts, didn't go anyplace. Pleasure, her pleasure was a big family—that made everything!" (17). Though the women Messina interviews were members of different first and second generations than I deal with in this thesis, the themes Messina uncovers are still relevant to my topic. She looks closely at how these women were taught, from childhood, to view and respond to their plight as homemakers, mothers, and cultural caretakers. Family life was both the woman's responsibility and, if managed well, her reward. Annunziata can be seen throughout *Christ in Concrete* enjoying the fruits of her labor. In the early pages of the novel, Annunziata and Geremio share dreams for their children's futures as they lie in bed (7). Annunziata talks of dancing with her children and blushes to think of continuing to dance the tarantella, a dance style native of Southern Italy, after her children have learned to dance in the "American style" (7). However, while this fulfillment in her home and family is easily seen while her husband Geremio is still alive—the couple is then finalizing the purchase of a house—it seems to vanish after his death and her family is no longer whole.

Alongside maintaining a sense of happiness and satisfaction in the home, another way in which the women's responsibility and "centeredness" played out was in the family's financial

organization and oversight (Treese 28). This detail of Italian life is shown in Annunziata's story and depicts just one area in which Italian women were first othered by moving to America and having little knowledge of language or laws and again hurt by the Depression's limiting of financial resources, leaving many Italian American mothers like Annunziata with a set of unfulfillable responsibilities. Treese sums up the role of first-generation Italian mothers by saying that they had very little control, despite having the bulk of the family responsibility (29). Annunziata's experience in this regard is actually compounded by her widowhood. Her responsibilities are multiplied because she has no husband upon whom to rely. She is, after Geremio's death, not only responsible for setting a budget and monitoring spending but now also responsible for providing income, a task that never would have fallen to her with a husband and one that she has little hope of completing. Tension builds once Paul goes to work. Annunziata now has another source of income, but, because Paul is so young and inexperienced, it does not compare to Geremio's earnings in either stability or amount. Annunziata is, therefore, an extreme picture of the domestic responsibilities put upon Italian American women.

These first-generation women were the strong-willed, articulate, powerful forces of the Italian family, yet they were plucked out of their context and put into one in which they could do little but listen and serve (Mangione and Morreale 335). In Italian culture outside the home, women did not have great power. The little amount of respect Italian women, especially mothers, were given in their society was strongly tied to Roman Catholic theology in which the Virgin Mary sits at the right hand of Christ, acting as intercessor. She was expected to provide for family life beyond simple well-being and nurturing, primarily by preventing her children from losing their Italian identity in the process of adjusting to American life. On top of this, her physical environment was new and uncomfortable. While used to the warm, sunny, outdoor-

oriented existence of southern Italy, women like Annunziata were thrust into cold, desolate, unwelcoming, and dirty tenements and expected to fulfill the same roles and cultivate a similar family life often without so much as a window through which to see the outside world. Each family's flat within the tenements "had its distinctive powerful odor. There was a particular individual bouquet that aroused a repulsion followed by sympathetic human kinship; the great organ of Tenement fuguing forth its rhapsody with pounding identification to each sense" (Di Donato 103). Life in these tenements was in many ways the counter-world to Annunziata's sunny, southern Italian childhood full of herbaceous sauces and baked bread. This was the setting in which she was bound to a life of domestic labor.

Alongside this life of domestic work, an Italian mother was tasked with the all-important work of transmitting Italian culture and heritage to her children. This responsibility was, in a sense, her highest calling in the New World. Sociological research on value transmission between first- and second-generation immigrants is largely recent, but many sources focus especially on language and sociolinguistic aspects of Italian American history. In fact, most of what is known now comes from analyzing current phenomena or looking back through interviews with early 1900s immigrants to North America. Elena Caneva and Sonia Pozzi analyze Italian American value transmission between first- and second-generation immigrants in more recent years. Their research is helpful in understanding the cultural traditions involved in transplanting Italian families to other countries. Their research helps capture a larger picture of cultural preservation in the form of language transmission to the children of first-generation immigrants.

The responsibilities of the first-generation woman included her role as the preserver of Italian culture in America, both for her family and community. This role was at its most palpable

in the relationship between the mother and her children. Caneva and Pozzi highlight this struggle in the broader parameters of intergenerational value transmission in Italian immigrant families in European contexts, showing that the emphasis placed on cultural preservation often fell to the mother, and the mother only. In fact, often, if children strayed from any aspect of traditional Italian life or values, the watching community turned their scornful eyes on the mother, wondering what she must have done wrong. Mangione and Morreale suggest that a major source of strife in the Italian American mother's life was having to watch her daughter join American culture (336). After many years of attempting to transmit mother-tongue dialect and motherland culture to her children, the Italian mother was forced to let her children abandon their heritage in favor of a new one, causing a large gap between the first and second-generation Italian immigrants that Annunziata and Gurzau represent (336).

Strangely enough, overt references to this specific responsibility are few in *Christ in Concrete.* While some aspects of Annunziata's role are highlighted in the story, her role in the family exists as a scarcely mentioned, yet ever-present undercurrent to the life of everyone in the novel: "Annunziata was eternity, rocking" (Di Donato 29). Her only real, noted interactions with her children are those with her oldest son, Paul, whose daily return home is met with Annunziata and her food and comfort. The daily existence of each character is undergirded by the steadfastness of Annunziata's work as mother, sister, and woman. One night after finishing his work, Paul sees his mother emerge in the hallway of their home: "Ah mother. So heavy worn and early gray" (220). He is exhausted from manual labor as a bricklayer, and all the while her work, which goes unnoted, is depleting her and the home life to which Paul expects to return.

Annunziata's work of cultural conservation can be seen most clearly when she hosts Cola and Luigi's wedding party at her home. It seems clear that Annunziata and Cola, presumably

with the help of other Italian women, host, organize, and cook for the lively event and clean up after it. This is an event at which the food and dancing bring to the forefront of everyone's mind their shared Italian heritage and culture. In a night full of eating, drinking, talking, and dancing, Annunziata's role as host cultivates an environment in which all members of the party are mentally transported to their homeland. In one particular passage, there is significant attention given to the richness of the food which Annunziata serves:

> The chicken soup was rich with eggs, fennel, artichoke roots, grated parmesan, and noodles that melted on lips. They ate leisurely and with the knowledge that there was much to be had and plenty of time in which to put it into their flesh. The soup plates were removed and in were brought broiled fat eels garnished with garlic and parsley. Lemon juice was squeezed upon them, and tender white was their meat. The flagons moved about the tables without stop and every mouthful was aided with thick red wine. (190)

Annunziata's name is not mentioned even once in this passage, yet the work of her hands and her movement in and out of the room, taking away finished dishes and providing new, succulent courses are the catalysts of this scene. After so long of having nothing, of Paul's going hungry, of Annunziata's working in a cold apartment throughout the short winter days and long nights, this feast is full of warmth and comfort. Guests and family alike are able to sit eating "leisurely and with the knowledge that there was much to be had and plenty of time in which to put it into their flesh." There is abundance that comes from Annunziata and other Italian women pooling all of their resources and abilities so that for this one night, every paesano can feast like they are back in the sunny Mezzogiorno.

Guests dance the tarantella, eat spaghetti straight off the table, drink wine, and laugh heartily. Readers are able to glimpse the full power of this cultural experience through the eyes

of Louis and Av-rom, two Jewish guests who are the only non-Italian celebrants. Their presence at this cultural event provides eyes through which readers can view this experience. The two boys get drunk on wine and watch in hilarity as the paesanos at the party play cards and talk loudly. Through the hospitality of Annunziata and Cola, even cultural outsiders are able to seamlessly blend in. They pull up chairs at the table, eat the food, and indulge in wine and dancing. In short, Annunziata makes her culture accessible to everyone around her, while preserving its traditions in the New World for its immigrants.

The wedding feast is the single instance in the novel when Annunziata is able to successfully transplant Italy into her Lower East Side tenement. Because her Italianness is rejected by American culture at every turn, this micro-Italy that she creates for the feast offers to her a brief respite from domestic work that yields no fulfillment or peace. This problem of needing to recreate Italy in America in order to thrive is one that Annunziata struggles with throughout her life. With the exception of the wedding feast, Annunziata is more often left uncomfortable and desperately searching for meaning in her work, her religion, and her legacy after Geremio's death.

Italian Americans and Conceptions of Work

The Italian home in the American context was what Michel Foucault would call a heterotopia, a place or realm outside popular, everyday culture. Foucault had in mind such places as churches, graveyards, and hospitals, which either suspend, separate, or protect groups of people from the mainstream world (1). In the case of the Italian home in America, the concept of heterotopia captures a place with a set of values seemingly out of step with the quickly modernizing American ones. This home was a sanctuary for Italian culture and traditions. Even

though its occupants were people who were either pushing against the infiltration of American ideals or fighting to adopt them and combine them with their cultural heritage, causing tension within the home that widened the chasm between the first- and second-generation Italian Americans.

The foundational structure of the Italian home lies in the expectations of work and productivity placed on both men and women. Messina discusses several other work-related sentiments brought up by her interviewees, beyond the pleasure found in work. She summarizes the sentiments of the women she interviewed by saying that work was the center of their experiences (16). She goes on to quote an interviewee as saying that "an ethic of heroic suffering and personal sacrifice dominated the expectations of how one fulfilled family obligations" (16). By saying this, Messina is solidifying the claim that work and productivity were not only the glory of the males in the family but also the burden of the women.

Mariolina Salvatori categorizes Di Donato's treatment of women's domestic work as peripheral and indirect by arguing that men's work in the immigrant novel takes place in the "public sphere" while women's domestic work is relegated to the "private sphere" (40). Apart from the feast, much of Annunziata's work takes place either in seclusion and isolation from her community or in the company of a few other immigrant women. Her work often seems to not be visible even to her family. Italian Americans often put heavy emphasis on visible results of work, claiming that these results equate to the value of the labor, which ultimately leaves the often intangible labor of women diminished and devalued. Paul boasts of his own contribution to his family's survival by saying, "'hand to hand I have locked dumb stones in place and great building rises. I have earned a bit of bread for me and mine'" (Di Donato 7). What kind of tangible outcome did these women get to see from their work? Primarily, their satisfaction, or

more rightly their proof that they are doing their jobs well, seems to be lost in the fact that their work was invisible. They kept their families alive and fed, but, at the end of the day, success looked like a clean kitchen, empty sink, and sleeping, silent children. Women's private work in the early twentieth-century Italian-American home was easier to ignore because there was less to show for it.

Salvatori believes Di Donato and other authors of immigrant novels "acknowledge the presence of women in the history of immigration by emphasizing how women's domestic work contributed to the family's survival. By rescuing the domestic from anonymity these writers counter the traditional asymmetry between the 'public domain' (the locus of men's activities and forms of association) and the 'private domain' (the locus of women's modes of activities and minimal institutions)" (39). Di Donato rescues Annunziata from this anonymity by letting her presence buttress the lives and work of many other characters in the novel. The scenes from Cola and Luigi's wedding feast show Annunziata's work moving in and out of the narrative, often acting as a powerful force of Italianness in the lives of these immigrant men, and yet her name is mentioned only every so often. Immigrant men worked long, often dangerous hours in the public sphere—outside the home, often in the company of other men and under the purview of corporate managers. While most men were working their jobs, the women were left carrying every responsibility that existed within the private sphere. They worked primarily within the home, without much contact with other fellow workers, and not under the supervision of any designated authority.

The primary problem with this separation of work is that public sphere work can often be left at the job site, whereas private sphere work within the home seeps into every waking hour of the woman. Annunziata's work continues even in the hours after her husband's death. Her work

of arranging the funeral and comforting her friends who also lost husbands consumes much of her life for a period of time, while the work of providing for her children never ceases. Salvatori identifies the issue that though some writers acknowledge women's work in novels of immigrant life, it is often treated as "non-work," a designation that in turn erases these women's role in the history of Italian immigrant communities in America (39). Di Donato's portrayal of Annunziata walks the line between these two kinds of work, public and private, by balancing his description of Annunziata's daily domestic work as a mother with her role in her immediate community as a hostess. Even though the work she performs in the novel is rarely given the attention it deserves, its effect on those around her is evident. She is worn by her daily tasks as well as the mental and emotional strain of solely carrying her family's well-being on her back; the death of her husband "[breaks] her blood and [paints] age in her face," (49) though the children still need the same reliable, vibrant mother.

Italian Views on Education, Literacy, and Language

For first-generation Italian Americans, the necessity of work and steady income led to a narrow view of the powers of education and intellectual labor. Ideas that education was damaging or dangerous permeated the Italian American mindset and led to a culture that placed arguably too high a value on work and manual productivity in the economy. For the first generation, education was a moot point. In a context where survival was the daily focus and goal, learning how to read and write in English and become intellectually creative members of American high culture was not only unnecessary but counter-productive. Nancy Carnevale examines interviews she conducted with nine "paesani," or fellow townspeople, of her Italian parents. These paesanos are traditionally considered just as close as family. Carnevale says that

in the course of eighteen total interviews, two with each woman, a major theme she latched onto was that of social mobility as a function of English-language proficiency (89). Such proficiency was a primary area in which an Italian American woman was hindered in her life in America. Matteo Pretelli reviews scholarship pertaining to the education of Italian American immigrants. He deals with Italians' relationship to the standard dialect of the Italian language, and how Italian immigrants often promoted education in Standard Italian – "using it as a means to preserve migrants' *Italianità* (Italian character) in the Little Italies" (62). Pretelli, citing the work of Vermeulen and Perlmann, presents data that paints a bleak picture of the educational and literacy levels of the early Italian immigrants:

> Figures indicate how, in 1901, approximately 44 percent of Italian migrants to the United States were illiterate, compared to 36 percent of all new immigrants arriving at the turn of the century (Vermeulen and Perlmann). Illiteracy ranged from the lower levels registered in northern Italians (11 percent) to higher numbers among southern Italians (52 percent), who were among the worst performers of European migrants. (62)

In the mind of first-generation immigrants coming from Italy, a country which at the time of unification in 1860 was run largely by an elite class, education was a potential tool of the ruling classes to subjugate and exploit the lower classes such as agricultural workers (Pretelli, 62; Carnevale, 87). Beyond the uncertainty of a public education overseen by the American government, Italians saw American education for their children as something that could eventually break down the family structure, which was built on age- and gender-oriented hierarchies (Carnevale, 87). "In a society ruled by notions of honor and shame, the education of daughters was particularly suspect," Carnevale writes, adding that women were not only culturally obligated to stay in the home but also intellectually crippled by illiteracy and thus left

with no other real options. The first generation of Italian Americans passed on to their children and grandchildren a kind of education that was highly cultural. They valued and thus emphasized the "transmission" of such heritages as the "proverbs that conveyed the fabled knowledge of the elders, 'I'antiq'" (Carnevale 97).

For Italian immigrants in the United States, the ability to have any kind of social mobility or attain financial success was often inseparable from the individual immigrant's ability to understand and produce the American English language. However, the generally suspicious and ambivalent attitude towards education, especially the education of women, produced a people group that was continuously getting knocked down on the American social and economic ladder because of their lack of proficiency in English.

The lack of Standard American English proficiency and its often isolating effects are clearly depicted throughout Annunziata's story. She is at every turn hindered by her inability to articulate her needs in public or even to sign her name. Before Geremio's death, the couple purchases a home. In the signing of the papers, Annunziata is able only to draw an "x" in place of her name. After the death of her husband, Annunziata is reliant on her eldest son Paul in every situation involving communication in English: she sits with "folded hands" while Paul orders the family's groceries (51). When Annunziata and Paul consult the medium, Annunziata sits in constant strain in order to try and make out the "difficult American tongue" in which the medium is translating Geremio's words from heaven (112). Annunziata is unable to argue for her husband's death pension because she does not know the "America-tongue," and "without it, [she is] dumb and blind" and Paul is forced to speak up on his father's behalf (133).

Annunziata is dangling in this space between languages. She is proficient in her regional dialect of Italian and perhaps comfortable with Standard Italian, leaving her essentially stranded

in only familiar settings such as home and the church: two of the only places where she can speak easily and comfortably with those whom she knows. These limitations concerning where Annunziata can speak and be understood leads to heavy reliance on those around her, specifically men, to communicate and act on her behalf.

However, in the end, the work of the Italian American mother to preserve Mezzogiorno culture and tradition in the home while keeping the family together was challenged by what her children were learning in their American schools, including an increasing proficiency in English. Country versus culture would often create "intergenerational conflict", as Treese explains (31). The language of the second generation was vastly different from the language their parents spoke. Because this generation was the first to attend American schools in large numbers, issues of literacy were widely resolved and fluency in English rose to higher numbers. In fact, school children, most of whom were second-generation students, would often neglect their original language or dialect for English (Martella 61). This newly acquired fluency in English allowed second-generation women, like Gurzau, to forego many of the cultural struggles faced by their mothers. These women could speak to everyone they met, sign their own names, and advocate more effectively for themselves, and they were ultimately able to live a more self-sustaining, independent, free lifestyle than their mothers were able to live.

However, the second-generation Italian immigrant woman’s sense of liberation did not come without tension and sacrifice. The language shift that happened between the first generation and the second caused a huge strain on Italian American culture. Carnevale sets up this dichotomy by saying that the first-generation Italian Americans often felt that they were trapped in a linguistic wasteland, unable to gain proficiency in any tongue but Italian immigrant gergo (slang). This gergo was stigmatized as purely migrant speech, and children of immigrants

thus rejected it. Caneva and Pozzi cite D'Alisera as saying that "additional conflicts would arise in the homes as to the relations with the homeland. Children would often feel ashamed of their country of origin's customs and traditions and try to distance themselves from those" (437). Second-generation Italian Americans often dealt with this shame by breaking free from the patriarchal and hierarchical systems of their homeland. Caneva and Pozzi say that members of the second generation were able to, in a sense, pick and choose what aspects of Italianness they adopted and which ones they let go: "They select and accept some practices of the homeland culture, whereas they reject others, building bridges among cultures and using multicultural repertoires" (438).

Elba F. Gurzau, the Second Generation, and the Legacy of its Mothers

Because the mass emigration of Italian Americans happened between 1860 and 1920, there is no single time period in which the second generation was born, but this analysis focuses on the group of second-generation Italian Americans who were born within the first fifteen years of the twentieth century. In 1909, the year Elba Gurzau was born, the general topic of assimilation of Italian Americans into wider American culture was beginning to become more public. Italian Americans engaged in this particular issue by entering debates on subjects such as education and work opportunities. Because of these debates, more and more members of the second generation started to see the possibilities of American citizenship. Men began to fight for safer working conditions, women began to seek employment outside the home, and more Italian Americans began leaving the lifestyles and values connected with an Italo-Catholic worldview behind, all shifts that made further widened the cultural chasm between the first and second generation (Mangione and Morreale 216). Because first-generation Italian women in America

were generally confined to the home, their daughters, with concentrated tenacity, pushed against many domestic constraints: they prioritized education and proficiency in speaking English; they sought jobs outside the home; they avoided marriage in their young adulthood; and, if they married, they postponed having children (Mangione and Morreale 216). The rejection of the domestic values of their mothers happened not out of a lack of respect for the work of the mothers, but rather because they viewed their mothers' sacrifices as their springboard into a new way of life. Elba Gurzau's letters and journals reveal this kind of outlook on life and show a woman determined to embrace the opportunity to rise socially and professionally in American culture. In her accounts of day-to-day life, she models a kind of liberation that would have seemed far out of reach to women like Annunziata.

Gurzau's independence and ability to live most of her life in the public sphere are largely due to who her parents were, her upbringing, and the educational opportunities she was provided, all of which were certainly not available to every second-generation immigrant. She was the child of two educated first-generation Italians, who came to America during the first wave of immigration between 1880 and 1924, though the exact year of their emigration to New York City from Cesena, Italy is unknown. Once in the city, Gurzau's father Francesco Farabegoli opened a restaurant and went on to be successful in that venture. Their relative financial comfort allowed for Gurzau and her mother to travel to Italy in 1921 and ultimately extend their trip to a decade. During this time, Gurzau attended school in Florence, where she was able to master Standard Italian and gain skills that would enable her to pursue her future career as a teacher of both English and Italian. After graduating with a high-school level degree in Florence, Gurzau stayed in Italy in order to attend Istituto Magistrale, in Forli, Italy, where she studied until 1928. The

next year, she returned to New York City, where she enrolled at New York University, ultimately graduating with a B.S. degree in Education in 1932 (Houston 1).

While Gurzau enjoyed opportunities that made her public life and career path possible, her story is not entirely unique. Gurzau represents an early case of a second-generation Italian American woman challenging the social expectations that restrained the first generation of her era. Because of her extensive education, she was asked by the New York Uptown YWCA to organize the first NYC branch of the Italian American Mother's Club (IAMC) in 1934 (Treese 33). Thus began her lifelong interest in helping Italian American immigrant women not only to see beyond the confines of domesticity but also to hone the domestic and professional skills they would need for life in the United States. Treese describes Gurzau's ideals for the club:

> Farabegoli's [Gurzau's] mothers' clubs were initially designed to open the door and get Italian women out of their apartments and into a variety of educational, social, and recreational activities. In one speech, Gurzau described the first-generation Italian mother as 'the one member of the family who has the most difficulties and who has the least opportunities to enter into the spirit of American life'. (34)

Gurzau's work with the YMCA and IAMC led her to start an Italian folk dancing group called the Coro d'Italia. The IAMC worked to put on dances and cultural events that would allow Italian immigrants to preserve and enjoy their own culture while also exposing the greater American community to the art and traditions of their homeland. Alongside her instrumental work with the IAMC and Coro d'Italia, Gurzau worked in immigration services, helping new immigrants get set up in the city with housing and jobs. In fact, much of Gurzau's professional career and adult life was dedicated, in many ways, to easing the plight of immigrant groups.

Gurzau's wide influence on the Italian American community in New York City between the 1930s and 1940s can be traced back directly to the fact that she was not bound by tradition and forced to marry, have children, and work within the home. Gurzau had the freedom and was given the education to step into the public sphere and begin to bridge the vast expanse separating Italian culture and American culture.

In general, Gurzau's papers, including personal notes and diary entries, reflect the daily activities and thoughts of a young, single woman unconnected to any one place or person, without children, and full of hopes for her future and plans for self-betterment. Her lifestyle was, in many ways, atypical of a child of immigrants: Gurzau was certainly a member of the second generation, but she was born well before the rise of the 1960s-1970s women's movement when her kind of living became increasingly common among American women. Her journals, from 1933-1939 specifically, chronicle days in New York City as she teaches English classes, plans events for the Folk Society, and lists social obligations. Her writing depicts a woman free from most of the familial responsibilities and hostessing burdens that weighed on the previous generation. In one entry from 1933, Gurzau writes the following:

> For the last couple of weeks I have been wondering more than ever if I am not wasting my energy and getting nowhere. I feel I have now acquired enough general experience to settle down and do something I like and can do, more or less well, too many things. To [have][1] any kind of success <u>one must concentrate on one thing [sic]</u>. I knew this a long time ago but never seem to have been able to apply it. Now is the time to decide; which of the many things I do, do I like best and which can bring me the best financial […] net worth.

[1] Brackets added when manuscript illegible.

This passage gives a helpful look into the worldview of a second-generation woman and just how much it differed from the previous generation's. Gurzau was not only free to explore career changes and entertain personal desires but also able to act on her conclusions. The ability to entertain one's own professional and personal ambitions would have been far from the minds of first-generation Italian Americans, whose responsibilities and opportunities were predetermined based on gender from their births.

The American Dream seeps into Gurzau's worldview as she continues this theme of deciding her own fate throughout her entries. In the middle of one February 1934 entry, written in Italian, she interjects in English, "Elba, make use of your dream while you can." She shifts, briefly, from Italian to English to make this personal resolution, this commitment to professional public life in America. It is as if, by making this resolution in English, Gurzau is deciding how she will balance her Italian identity with her American identity; she is stating that she can stay fully Italian, even though her dream will require her to step fully into her American context, speak fluent English, and engage professionally in a multicultural city. Even though at this time, powerful forces were still confining American women as a group to the private sphere, an important ideological shift was taking place for these immigrant women. If the first-generation women were driven by the necessity to survive materially and preserve Italian culture, the second generation was equally driven by the need to make their own ways in the New World. This drive showed itself primarily in their seeking education in greater numbers and, in some cases like Gurzau's, postponing marriage and motherhood until later in life.

Elba Gurzau and Language Proficiency

Though Gurzau had little use for her mother tongue in daily life in the public sphere, with her education and job being primarily in English, she did teach Italian language classes in order to help immigrants gain or maintain proficiency in their native language as well as to promote the preservation of Italian culture in the United States, following in that central responsibility of the first-generation women. A particular entry in English from January 11, 1934, captures a lot about Gurzau's station in life and her worldview and depicts her use of languages:

> Yesterday I was really down hearted, perhaps also because I did not feel so well. Strange that last night on the train going to my class, at a certain moment, my mood changed.
> "Why, Elba, I am surprised at you; with your youth and beauty and possibilities, it's ridiculous[…"] something in me said to me, ["…] think of how many people would want to be in my place."
> The result was I had an enjoyable lesson, and I came home smiling, determined to help in with my classes and make good somewhere.
> I am writing on the roof; the sun is shining bright, the sky is all blue on the south and west sides and I feel confident in the future.

Along with freedom from domesticity, English-language proficiency gave to the second-generation Italian woman abilities that separated her from the previous generation. First, through the keeping of a journal, she had the ability to use language to communicate her own emotions, a luxury often out of the reach of first-generation women. Second, she was able to choose and excel in a career that made use of a skill set she acquired through education. Third, she was able to imagine and design her own future with a notable amount of mobility and freedom. It is, however, also important to stress that mainstream American society was, at this point, still unwelcoming many women into professional careers outside of secretarial work, nursing, teaching, and domestic work.

For the first generation, domestic work was the only option. All hopes of fulfillment, respect, and influence lay inside the walls of their tenements because outside, American culture had little left to offer women who were uneducated and illiterate. The daughters of these women grew up observing as their mothers worked themselves to the bone, and they watched as their mothers lay tired in old age. These daughters, therefore, applied themselves with all the more energy to English language study and leaped at opportunities to embrace American culture. Standing on the solid foundation their mothers provided for them, women like Elba Gurzau began to equip themselves and immigrant women around them for life and success in the great American cities.

While discussing the increasing social mobility of Italian Americans during the first four decades of the twentieth-century, it is crucial to also look briefly at changes in the ways race and "whiteness" were being categorized and defined in America during this time. Gurzau and other members of this second generation were allowed to break free and participate in American society more as equals partly because the general perception of their race was changing in the eyes of American culture. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses racial categories in twentieth-century America in the introduction to his book *Whiteness of a Different Color.* "White privilege in various forms has been a constant in American political culture since colonial times, but whiteness itself has been subject to all kinds of contests and has gone through a series of historical vicissitudes" (4). To support this idea, Jacobson cites many examples from history. First, in 1920's Alabama the court reversed a conviction of a black man, Jim Rollins, on the grounds that they were unable to certify that the alleged victim was actually a white woman. She was a Sicilian immigrant (4). Also, in racial categories of the early 1900s, whiteness was a narrower group. In fact, Margaret Byington separated "English-speaking Europeans" from

"native whites" and Slavs in her 1910 sociological study (5). Essentially, the period on which this thesis focuses was a time of transformation for Eastern European and Southern European immigrants in the racial imagination of the United States. These Italian immigrants began the twentieth-century as "not quite white" but, by the middle of the century, they were considered bona fide white people and therefore were allowed to rise socially in a way that was less available to their first-generation parents.

On a larger scale, the second generation's liberation from domesticity allowed for more work in the public sphere by women like Gurzau, ultimately helping integrate Italian culture with White American culture. Work like Gurzau's connected Italian immigrant women with each other and with their host culture. Gurzau was able to use her bilingualism and professional knowledge to pave the way for immigrant women of her own generation and women who were to follow. The difference is not that these women had different values or were faced with different cultural expectations; it is simply that Annunziata's American experience was confined to the home, and she was not allowed to gain the education she needed to be successful in preserving Italian culture through her children or her immediate community in a lasting way. Because of this limitation, Annunziata's legacy was thus stopped short, and she was left holding tightly to what fading influence she did have: influence within her home. In contrast, Gurzau's work allowed her to preserve and promote Italian culture outside the home, bridging gaps between the cultures.

CHAPTER 2: ITALIAN AMERICAN WOMEN AND CULTURAL CATHOLICISM

A primary facet of bridging cultural gaps between Italy and America was the need to translate Italo-Catholicism into the American, largely Protestant context. Catholic religious practices were central to the work and mission of Italian immigrant women, and yet they also proved to be the source of tension, dissatisfaction, and confusion for these immigrants. If throughout *Christ in Concrete* Annunziata shows only vague signs of questioning her religious beliefs in the American context, it is the end of the novel that gives evidence of any real collapse of the Italo-Catholic faith she has been clinging to. In this chapter, I hope to show why Annunziata's deep commitment to faith still falls short by defining the differences between doctrinal Catholicism and cultural Catholicism. I will also seek to pinpoint how Gurzau was able to detach herself from Italo-Catholic culture while remaining fully integrated with her Italian identity.

Aside from the feast scene, Annunziata is ultimately unsuccessful in recreating an Italy in New York City. Throughout her story, it becomes clear that her faith is not only culturally-bound but also that it continues to ring hollow in her new context. Paul is drawn away from his Catholic faith because he is unable to reconcile his beliefs with the pain that he is witnessing every single day. In response, Annunziata is often rendered confused and frustrated in the face of Paul's questions. In the end, her belief system is so bound to Italianness that she cannot translate her faith into this new context. She never overtly experiences a crisis of faith, but by the end of the novel, Annunziata's grip on her faith certainly seems loosened. After much time trying to keep Paul from rejecting Catholicism, Annunziata turns to Paul as a beacon of certainty and hope:

‘Né… Né… Né…
How beautiful is he
Little Paul my own
Whose Jesu Self
Glorified our home…
Nadi… Nadi… Nadi…
Gifted to Me
By the Madonna was he
And of this son
Shall rise
A topless lighted Column…!
… Né …. Né …. Né …’
With numbing hand she beckoned.
‘Children wonderful… love… love love…love ever our Paul… Follow him.’

Thus Annunziata’s life ends, and the state of her faith is left ambiguous. Her last profession of faith seems to rest, strangely, on her son Paul, who, unable to find solace or explanation for his suffering in the religion of his Italian heritage, has redirected his allegiance to Job, perhaps even to Communism. Why does this woman, who is so devoted to Italian tradition and the Catholic religion, end up in a place of religious uncertainty? Why, when she never felt the need to legitimately question her faith, does Annunziata turn her dying eyes away from the crucifix and towards her son Paul, who has rejected faith altogether? The religious expectations and traditions that gripped the Italian American people during the early twentieth century offer answers to these questions. They also suggest why so many members of the second generation walked away from their Italo-Catholic roots.

For centuries many Italians have understood that Catholicism, to some degree, is inseparable from Italian culture (Kvidera, 158). Because of this widely felt connection between national identity and religious affiliation, the Italian mother’s practical role in the family as a provider and nurturer often extended beyond the tangible, and she was seen as the spiritual leader of her household, at least in a symbolic sense. The Italian mother was in charge of overseeing the

religious lives of her children and even her husband, ultimately placing as one of her primary responsibilities the pious living of every member of her household. The public religious function and the personal spiritual life of Italian American women are the realms in which Annunziata is most often depicted in *Christ in Concrete* and because Elba Gurzau wrestles several times throughout her journals with her religious identity. Though Annunziata's practical and material maintenance is the bedrock of the family, her spiritual leadership continues to surface in significant ways throughout the narrative, most visibly in the final section of *Christ in Concrete*, which Di Donato titles "Annunziata."

The Italian expression of the Catholic faith placed women at the center of the family, the community, the church, and even aspects of their doctrine. Not only did the women lead their family in most spiritual and religious matters outside the walls of the church, but one of the Italian woman's primary social groups would have been found within the church, and her most efficient method of preserving her culture would have been through the cultivation of religious rites and traditions within her home and community. Despite women's centrality in Italian religious experience, Palmisano and Martino, in an essay discussing gender in Italian religion, say that "Italian sociology of religion lacks a gender perspective: sociologists have for the most part ignored women's religious experience" (565). While scholars have largely overlooked women's religious lives, it should not be ignored that an Italian woman played a major role in her family's spiritual practices, at least during the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century.

This connection between religious traditions and Italian identity was so central to the Italian worldview that it formed an entirely different, vernacular expression of Catholicism, often called "cultural Catholicism." This relationship between culture and religion means that Italian

Catholic beliefs and practices were distinct in many ways from other cultural iterations of Catholicism, such as the Irish Catholicism. Citing the label "cultural Catholicism" as used by scholar Thomas J. Ferraro, Peter Kvidera explains this dynamic between what he calls "ethno-racial affiliation" and Catholicism as "a shift in religious orientation in which Catholic ways of knowing and habits of being are developed and deployed (intentionally or not) outside the official precincts and sanction of the Church" (158). In other words, because of cultural Catholicism, practices of Catholicism existed within Italian circles in ways unrelated to religious institutions and practices. He goes on to say that "cultural Catholics still value ritual, iconicity, the sacraments, redemption, intercessory mediation, and reverence for the sanctity of Christ's body" even if, in many ways, they separate these things from the domain of the church and "continue to celebrate […] even if in unorthodox ways" (158). Ferraro's concept of cultural Catholicism illuminates Annunziata's complex relationship to the religion she is tasked with carrying and passing on. This concept also helps us to grasp how Gurzau was able to interact with Catholicism in an entirely different way than her ancestors. A culture of Catholicism was so intertwined with Italian identity that aspects of the religion were often deemed by outsiders to be more Italian than they were Christian. To disown Catholicism as an Italian was to disown a central aspect of one's heritage and national identity and doing so often led to one's being estranged from family. This tension began as soon as cultural Catholicism was carried across the Atlantic. The responsibility of preserving Italian culture, which included religion, had a tight-fisted hold on Italian American immigrants, primarily women. They were expecting, despite the new context, to maintain this relationship between culture and religion that they had experienced in Italy. When this proved more and more impossible in a quickly modernizing and secularizing America, the full force of failure fell on the women.

Earlier in the novel, Paul's attempt to reject the faith is met with extreme anguish on the part of his mother. She reads his disillusionment with Catholicism as both a religious apostasy and a renunciation of Italian identity. However, because her own faith is also a primarily culturally based version of Catholicism, she is not able to assuage Paul's feelings that his inherited faith is inarticulate in America. In other words, Paul is discovering that the faith of his paesanos, one inextricably linked to Italy and Italianness, does not seem to work in the New World.

Cultural Catholicism looms so large in *Christ in Concrete* that Di Donato's first-generation Italian characters are not given the option to "exit" their religion any more than they are given the option to "exit" their ethno-racial community (Kvidera 158). Kvidera points out that Di Donato himself uses cultural Catholicism in his narrative: Catholic symbolism and language permeate the text and dialogue between characters, even ones who reject God and religion altogether (157). But despite the saturation of Catholicism in the narrative, many of Di Donato's characters end up questioning or rejecting the Catholic faith by the end of the novel. Even Annunziata's final lines hint at some sort of deconstruction of religious beliefs.

While an understanding of cultural Catholicism brings a new light to Annunziata's response to Paul's rejection of the faith at the end of the story, it also gives helpful insight into Annunziata's methods of dealing with profound feelings of loss and abandonment. It also helps make sense of her frustration with the Catholic church in New York City: a religious institution from which she expects to gain help and hope, and instead is faced with rejection and silence.

Italian American Iterations of the Catholic Faith

An effective discussion of the historical realities of Italian women operating within religion necessitates a look at the Italian interpretation of Catholic core beliefs. Highlighting aspects of Italo-Catholic theology, in effect, clarify what these Italian American women believed about themselves, about God, and about their personal relationship with their God.

Generally, most tenets of the Christian faith, of which Catholicism is a sect, place at the center of their theology concepts such as the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is important to state that many of the Catholic core doctrines align with the orthodoxy of other sects of Christianity, but where they differ, they tend to differ widely. One of the primary ways in which Catholicism is distinct from other practices of the Christian faith is in their views of the Virgin Mary and her role in believers' daily lives. Protestantism recognizes Mary as chosen by God to carry, give birth to, and raise Jesus. She was, however, in every way a normal human, stained by sin and yet, because of her faith, picked by God to play a unique role in his redemptive plan for humankind. Catholicism, on the other hand, views Mary, the mother of Jesus, as playing a significant role as an intermediary between people and God. In Catholicism, Mary is not equal to Jesus, but she is glorified and prayed to because of the honor placed on her by Jesus. Catholics also believe in the idea of immaculate conception, in which Mary was preserved from sin and made perfect when she became the mother of Jesus (Roten).

I look specifically at these Catholic views of Mary because they influenced how most Italian Catholics viewed the spiritual responsibilities of womanhood and motherhood. When Annunziata takes on the role of shepherding her children in their faith, it is not only because Geremio has died and left a vacuum of authority within his household, but also because Annunziata is following an Italian Catholic tradition that began with Mary and continues to be

overseen by Mary from heaven: women act, in small ways, as intermediaries between this world and the next. This means that when children fell away from the faith or rejected it outright, the spiritual weight of failure fell on the mother. It also means that these mothers had to be steadfast and unwavering in their faith for their children's and community's sake, because when they were weak, the connection to God was, in some sense, weakened. So, when these women left their homeland in Italy and were forced to try to build a successful life in the New World, their responsibilities as spiritual leaders ended up taking an even more prominent role in their daily existence. They were unable to control so much around them and unable to contribute to so much of American society that they often would zero in on their jobs as hostesses and crucial members of their local church community.

Italian Women in the Catholic Church

When Italians immigrated to America, they carried across the ocean a deep-seated mistrust in the entity of the Church that stemmed from conflict between church and state in Italy and within the Catholic Church at large. However, because so much of their faith was more closely tied to cultural practices rather than church-ordained rituals, this mistrust affected the practice of the Italian faith in very few ways. In the end, the church for Italian American immigrants was fed and kept alive by women, for it was they who could bridge the gaps between the home, the community, and the Catholic Church (Mangione and Morreale 326). In fact, for many Italian women, their primary access to society outside the home was found at church. At church, they had friends and could take responsibility for the religious aspects of their culture, such as helping to plan and organize events and festivities revolving around religious holidays.

It was not only uneasiness regarding authority that separated Italians from the Catholic church once they immigrated to the United States. In America during the early twentieth century, the Catholic church was predominantly Irish, dating back to the beginning of their settling in America in the 1820s, a few decades before the first large wave of Italians. This created a conflict between the two groups of immigrants. Irish leadership did not want to make room for the unfit Italian Catholics, who worshipped in a different way and had historically sided with anti-papist revolutionaries such as Garibaldi, to join the American expression of the Catholic Church (326). Ultimately, this led to many Italians putting distance between themselves and the institution, leaving huge vacuums that these Italian women filled.

Italian Catholicism, more so than Irish Catholicism, idolized the Virgin Mary. Though the Madonna still played a central role as the intermediary between the Church and Jesus Christ, the Irish Catholics were disturbed by how central the Italians had made Mary. As they saw it, the Italian Catholics had uplifted Mary to the exclusion of Jesus. The Italians also put on extravagantly depicted parade-like festivals and celebrations that "smacked more of paganism than piety" (Mangione and Morreale 326). In the minds of the Irish, their High-Church Catholicism was cheapened and mocked by the gaudy, material-oriented, culturally focused faith practices of their Italian neighbors.

Italians also tended to value family over the sacred gathering of the Church. While their religious practices differed greatly from the Irish Catholics in style, the home life of the Italians looked different as well, placing more importance on the home than church and elevating "the Sunday family dinner over the Eucharist," as Kvidera puts it (160). He goes on to say that "this apparent disregard for traditional practices—and conflation of the sacred and the secular—offended not only the Irish but also German and Eastern European Catholics, whose experience

as persecuted minorities only strengthened their reliance on faith and church" (160). Because of their experiences with Catholic authorities in Italy overstepping their bounds of power, the Italians were often deeply mistrusting of the liturgical aspects of the Catholic Church, but they held on in desperation to the religious and pragmatic Catholic iconography and symbols. In other words, they preserved Catholic doctrines and practices, while shying away from the traditional structure and hierarchy within the Catholic church. Extreme adoration and reverence for statues and figures of Christ and the Virgin Mary often took the form of kissing and other displays of affection, which disturbed onlookers unused to this practice (327). Italians also viewed God as a more compassionate, ever-merciful deity, while Irish Catholics held a stricter, more justice-oriented theology, which they ended up passing onto many of the second-generation Italian immigrants who remained in the church. This added yet another layer to the Italian mother's responsibility of cultural preservation: communicating to her children and grandchildren her understanding of the character of their God.

Why does this matter? These same women who were being forced to carry the mantle of their religious heritage and convictions were also the ones charged with the preservation of Italian culture. The relics of their Italian culture were the legacy that they were to pass on to their children and grandchildren and the seeds of tradition they were to plant in the United States. Caneva and Pozzi argue that, generally, for Italian immigrants to America, "[r]eligion also acts as 'refuge', that is psychological support aimed to give immigrants a sense of belonging to their original community" (439). Thus, nurturing a context in which Italian cultural Catholicism can thrive was necessary for maintaining a sense of safety. Because of this, preserving the Catholic traditions and rituals was an important part of the mother's job of safeguarding heritage and

culture. However, this preservation work proved increasingly difficult, sometimes even impossible, in the American context.

Annunziata's Religious Responsibilities

Despite the deep conviction of her spiritual responsibilities, Annunziata was ultimately unable to fully realize the purely cultural dimensions of her faith in the New World. Though the only hint of any kind of disillusionment with Catholicism only comes in the final lines of the novel, Annunziata's story is punctuated with confusion and frustration regarding her inability to make Catholicism relevant in America for her son Paul, who is facing a very real disillusionment in the face of Job and Communism. Despite her frustrations, the mantel of cultural Catholicism and the confines of domesticity continue to prohibit her from being able to question the cultural boundaries of her Italo-Catholic religion or find sincere depth within her personal faith. The gap between hopeful, universal faith and cultural Catholicism was large and Annunziata did not have the tools of education, literacy, or social mobility that could have allowed her to bridge that gap. She was staunchly dedicated to the vernacular Catholicism in which she was raised and in which she was raising her children. But, like so many Italian Americans whose experience with Catholicism looked more like adherence to cultural traditions rather than a universal belief, Annunziata was left unfulfilled and unable to reconcile her role as spiritual guardian of her children in the American context.

Because cultural Catholicism—a version of Italo-Catholicism that relies more on cultural practices and traditions than on any culturally transcendent beliefs or convictions—only truly thrives within its originally intended culture, Annunziata's spiritual role in her family takes a somewhat narrow form throughout the novel. The sense of spiritual responsibility to her children

often leads her to be a nurturing mother, tenderly guiding and sheltering them. But her inability to broaden her faith, one that operates and finds expression outside the boundaries of Italian culture, ultimately leads her to feelings of fear and anger. However, the first manifestation of her spiritual leadership in the novel takes a softer tone. She holds and stabilizes a home for her children, constantly guiding them back to their Catholic faith and their hope of salvation. In the following passage, Annunziata covers Paul with the cross in his sleep, not exerting its power and authority over him, but like the sheet, covering him in what safety she can offer:

> Softly-soft. Annunziata helped her Paul to the children's bed. It was dark and still there. She carefully removed his clothes and shoes of Job. Dust, cement, and his Job sweated flesh. She wetted with tongue her finger and signed the cross upon his forehead and pulsing joints. She covered him in a clean white sheet and kissed the hand that remained without. (Di Donato 221)

In this scene, she is a loving mother as much as she is the spiritual guardian of Paul. This maternal care brings Annunziata more fully into the role of the Virgin Mary, as her name's translation, "The Annunciation," would indicate. Just as Mary anoints Jesus' body and wraps him in linens, much like she did when he was born in Bethlehem in the book of Matthew, Annunziata signs the cross on Paul's forehead with her own saliva. Like Mary's preparation of Jesus' body for the grave in the New Testament gospel of Mark, Annunziata's undressing and covering Paul with the white sheet is, in many ways, reminiscent of preparing a body for burial. Annunziata seeks to provide for her children the spiritual covering that could protect them and guide them from childhood up to death in the ways of Christ if they should choose to keep on the path.

The religious shepherding instinct fades when Annunziata feels she has lost Paul's heart and in turn failed in her mission to save him for eternity. Not by coincidence, this loss of control begins when Paul recognizes, soon after Nazone's death, that Job has become the god of the America he knows. In his life, the New World has room for only one deity, and Job continues to assert its authority by claiming life after life. Paul has seen this power over life and death too many times, and in the face of his devastation, Annunziata is no longer able to construct a version of Italianness for her children where a culturally based faith makes any sense or offers any comfort.

At the wedding, when Annunziata does effectively transplant a sense of Italy in her New York City tenement, the paesanos exclaim that wine "spilled upon the table of joy is blessing" (190). They say again that "our Christ is happy when poor's table weeps red in laughter of wine" (190). Cultural Catholicism brings joy, fulfillment, and hope only when Italianness is abundant. When Annunziata is unable to cultivate this same Italianness, her faith feels empty and hopeless, and she cannot form an adequate balm for Paul's many questions and wounds.

When Paul faces his bitter disillusionment with Christ and with Catholicism after the death of Nazone, he looks at the crucifix Annunziata holds in her hand and asks, "Who nails us to the cross? Mother… why are we living!" (226). When Paul will not turn to God in his despair, Annunziata begins her work of interceding on his behalf, praying, and asking God to comfort and save him: "Mama! What are you praying for?" (229). Annunziata sees Paul's apostasy as a sign of exhaustion at first and pleads with him to let her bear his burden. Her maternal heart bleeds, and yet she cannot assuage his hurt. She weeps only briefly before becoming angry and frantic when Paul breaks her crucifix. Annunziata sees Paul's apostasy, just as her historical

counterparts would have, as a deep betrayal of not only who she is as a mother and a spiritual leader but also of her family's heritage and identity.

Emotional and tense, Annunziata's desperate clinging to the figure of Christ on the cross, wood and plastic, shows how strong her desire is for her faith to heal and comfort her and her children. Her grip on the plastic Christ—a mass-produced icon—also shows how closely she holds her role and responsibility as a maintainer of culture and religion in her family. This role, which Paul has just denied and rejected, is to Annunziata the core of her very identity and worth.

The dynamic at play in this scene closely parallels what Mangione and Morreale see in the changing relationship between Italian mothers and their children. While the mothers were trying to keep their culture sacred and their children from being Americanized and secularized more and more by American schools and Protestant churches, the children were feeling cultural pressure to assimilate (335). The tension was brought about by the children feeling pulled towards the new aspects of their identities as Americans, while the mother felt frantic not only to fulfill her role in the children's lives but also to preserve the culture and religion she held so closely. When Italianness is decentralized, cultural Catholicism loses a major foothold. Among the other levels of meaning involving religion, familial relations, gender roles, etc., a key feature being illustrated in Annunziata and Paul's relationship is that of cultural conflicts and growing pains between first- and second-generation Italian immigrants.

Annunziata's role as a spiritual leader in her family is, in fact, the only form in which she takes prominence throughout *Christ in Concrete.* Her general absence in the rest of the novel is conspicuous; her domestic roles operate quietly, as seen in the wedding feast. When she does appear in the novel in bigger, more obvious ways, she plays the role of Mother Mary. Her

dialogue is heavily religious, and her actions are almost exclusively maternal. We, as readers, do not get to see her womanhood separated from her motherhood.

Italian American immigrant mothers existed in a world of maternal responsibilities on dual planes. She was, first, the preserver of culture, wife to an Italian man, and mother to Italian American children. That is, she was the ambassador of the family's homeland, cultural values, and religion. On the second plane, however, she was expected to uphold the family in practical ways in an American context for which she was ill-equipped and in which she was unable to fully participate. She also needed to be able to reconcile her children's Americanization with their Italian heritage and Catholic religion. This dual nature of motherhood is what Annunziata is, in many ways, forced into, and it arguably contributes largely to her outburst of fear and confusion at the end of the novel. The failure to operate flawlessly in a new context often meant for the Italian mother failure, whether it be financial, social, familial, or religious.

Annunziata ends the novel falling short in both of her roles. She has dedicated her adult life to being a nurturer and provider, yet the novel never shows her family raised out of their economic or spiritual poverty. Instead, Annunziata's hope seems transferred to Paul, as she tells her children to follow him. The family experiences continued economic hardship brought on in part by the financial blow of the Depression but also by the grief of continued loss: first Geremio, then Nazone. She is unable to comfort Paul in his grief, confusion, and fear. She is often unable to keep him warm and full. In this discussion of Annunziata as the maintainer of Catholic faith and culture, it would be negligent to not acknowledge the counterforce that draws Paul away from the faith. That force is a new faith in happiness in the here and now, in justice, and in life; ultimately, it is faith in Communism that draws Paul away. This point is crucial to this analysis because it shows more than just Annunziata's failure and struggles to preserve faith

in her son; it also gives a better glimpse into the job of Italian American mothers during this time. The difficulty in this situation came not only from secularizing and Americanizing the children but also the attraction of the Communist movement and other left-wing political "faiths" such as anarchism. Cultural Catholicism often left Italians unable to reconcile their inherited beliefs with the movements of the New World.

Annunziata's failure here is not a personal failure but a reflection of a set of impossible responsibilities and expectations put upon the first-generation Italian American mother. The novel's depiction of Annunziata's labor and sacrifice on behalf of her family and her community reads like a historical anecdote of the hardship that existed in working-class immigrant families, a duress that the political and cultural Left was trying to illuminate during the long 1930s. In the end, Annunziata's embodiment of maternity in *Christ in Concrete* shows a broken system in which these Italian immigrants struggled to build their homes and by which they were ultimately killed.

Elba Gurzau's Religious Experiences and Cultural Preservation Efforts – Explorations Outside of Catholicism

As the conflict between Annunziata and Paul illustrates, second-generation Italian Americans were faced with the pressure to "be Italian" in not only areas of language but also in their religious practice. However, most members of the second generation generally had more fluency in American culture due to a sort of trickle-down effect. When the first generation of immigrants came to America and began working and raising families, they were surrounded largely by other Italians who had come straight from Italy; therefore, their engagement with Italian culture was more direct. Once the second generation came about, their experience with

Italian culture was diluted in some ways, owing largely to their encounters with American culture both at school and within the Catholic church, which was still, despite the involvement of Italian women, largely Irish. Ultimately, more than their parents, they were being actively Americanized from all sides. As a group, a higher percentage of the second-generation was fluent in English and attained higher levels of education due to the financial stability provided by their parents. And at the end of their days spent among Americans and immigrants from all over the globe, they were returning to an Italian home that likely looked increasingly outdated and out of sync with the modern world because of their parents' strict adherence to Italian traditions and religious practices. They were facing intense pressure to assimilate within the educational institutions they attended and yet running into opposing pressure at home (Mangione and Morreale 335).

This kind of cultural tension often resulted in second-generation women who fell all over the religious spectrum: some continued in the Catholic tradition of their parents, some renounced faith and religion altogether, some found themselves searching for different expressions of their faith, and some landed in new faith systems entirely. In other words, the picture of Paul's abandonment of faith in *Christ in Concrete* depicts an increasingly normal experience for second-generation Italian Americans. Elba Gurzau also shifted along this spectrum in her young adulthood, engaging intellectually with members of different religions and allowing herself to question ideas brought to her, including the ones with which she grew up.

One particular entry in Gurzau's journals gives insight into her experience with cultural religion and her desire to form personal beliefs. When she wrote the following entry, Gurzau was already highly educated, holding both Italian and American university degrees, and well-traveled. She was used to the independence and confidence that came with her young

womanhood, living unmarried and working full time in Philadelphia and then New York City. In this passage, Gurzau has apparently been engaging in many philosophical and theological discussions with intellectuals within her social circle and is working through a new sense of enlightenment in regard to Christian teachings. She is also reconciling these new iterations of her familiar faith with the Catholic expressions with which she was raised:

> Dec. 7th, 1933
> A new life is beginning for me, a new outlook, a new phase of my evolution-
> I have been searching for the truth for something higher-
> Three men have been sent on my path & help – a mistic [sic], a follower of Christ, and the great sculptor who following my wish gave me the Indian philosophy and study – I know so little of each of these systems, but I see them all connected, and all aiming toward that higher part of us toward that perfection that is beyond our imagination-
> I have always considered other people materialistic but today I realize I was – Although I did think there was a beyond, still I gave it very little importance and worth for this life as an end in itself.
> Now I see why we can't find happiness, we are looking for it in the wrong place, we are on the wrong path!
> That Indian philosophy makes me understand a little of our Christian teachings, makes me understand the saints.
> I confess now I always thought there was something imaginary in their visions.
> Why do I believe them now, because it is coming to me from a different angle and I am going to it with a different attitude.
> I believe many are the paths to perfection, to salvation, but perhaps the Christian is the most known although very few really get the meaning of it all.
> I do feel an inner contentment; is it due from my new knowledge I do hope it lasts and grows.
> Other things acquire only relative importance.[2]

Initially, Gurzau's concept of her own "evolution" is striking considering her gender and cultural background. As was discussed in detail in the first chapter, this idea of a woman being able to develop, change, and grow out of one role or phase and into another was a more modern idea, in and of itself, and therefore, would have been out of the question for many first-generation

[2] Spacing copied from original manuscript.

women. Gurzau, because of her education and relatively privileged childhood, is in this passage beginning her religious questioning and searching from a stance of being allowed to explore and wonder.

Gurzau's writing also tells us a good deal about the actual faith of many Italian American Catholics. Gurzau was likely raised going to Mass, at the very least on holidays and special occasions, as well as celebrating saint's days and feasts. But as an adult, her understanding of the finer points of her inherited belief system is vague at best. She confesses that she "did think there was a beyond" but she says that she "still gave it very little importance and worth for this life as an end in itself." Gurzau not only refrains from using typical Catholic language for a beyond (i.e., "heaven," "eternity," etc.) but also says that she assigned it little importance in her life, thus revealing that she may take lightly other central aspects of her Catholic faith, seeing them as remote from her life. Despite the fact that the concept of a "beyond" and God's subsequent remaking of creation plays a central role in the Catholic faith and gives credence to many other aspects of Catholicism, Gurzau's uncertainty or indifference regarding the afterlife would have been common among second-generation Italians coming from a purely culturally Catholic background. Disillusionment of this kind or disconnection from the ardently held beliefs of their parents and ancestors can be identified in the writings of other second- and third-generation Italian Americans.

This process of losing or walking away from faith has led Italian American scholars like Richard Gambino to ask, "Is there anything in the Italian American legacy that is authentic [i.e., genuinely felt] religious experience? Is there anything in the heritage that is beyond what is

widely perceived as an assortment of archaic, 'quaint' folk beliefs and practices?" (39). [3] Gambino goes on to say that feelings of disconnection from Catholic belief systems are so widespread even today in Italian American religion that scholars and Italian Catholics alike are being forced to wonder what aspects of a living and active God actually exist in their belief system (39). He sums up the resounding problem by wondering, "is there anything in the tradition that goes beyond mundane, ordinary, limited human life, to personal or communal participation in something sacred?" (39). Gurzau states that she has been viewing everyone, even herself, as overly materialistic, which has led her to question the depth and legitimacy of her faith. These feelings are also part of what Paul feels in *Christ in Concrete* when he looks critically at his mother's adoration of a plastic crucifix and is repulsed and saddened. Gurzau seems to sense that what she knows of faith cannot be all there is and that she must therefore choose to walk away or press deeper.

As her journal entry progresses, Gurzau arrives at her sense of new hope and enlightenment. She discovers that some kind of crucial happiness and fulfillment is lacking in her Catholic experiences, and now, she says, she knows why. She has been able to use her education and skills in reading, writing, and rhetoric to access new interpretations of the "Christian teachings" with which she is familiar and also to gain exposure to "Eastern philosophies" (e.g., Hinduism). How exactly she goes on to reconcile these belief systems and interpretations of doctrines later in her life is not recorded in her journal entries; however, we are still able to glean much from them in regard to the religious curiosity and freedom of a second-generation Italian American woman. Italian vernacular Catholicism was ultimately not enough to

[3] Gambino's work fits within this analysis precisely because his exploration of problems within the Italian American religious traditions. He focuses less on Catholic theology and "formal creeds" and looks more at the human experience in cultural religious practices (40).

satisfy Gurzau's spiritual yearnings. The Italian religious traditions of her childhood were unable to speak to her American life, and therefore, she sought spiritual fulfillment elsewhere.

Ultimately, Gurzau held the necessary tools, gained from her education, to navigate not only the Catholic Church in America, which was an institutional culture often unaccepting of Italian American practices and theology but also to reimagine what faith could possibly be. She seems to begin to syncretize a new faith by the end of this passage. She says that "I believe many are the paths to perfection, to salvation, but perhaps the Christian is the most known although very few really get the meaning of it all." This revelation is, in itself, a departure from Christian philosophy, which hinges on Jesus being the one way and the one truth. Because of her ability to survey many religions and philosophies, Gurzau's departure from Christian orthodoxy here does not seem to spell a complete rejection of the Christian faith for her personally. She communicates a sense of safety in questioning and leaves the door open to ideas from multiple religions. While she departs from traditional expressions of Catholicism, she seems to hold on to some core Christian beliefs. More generally, it was her freedom from cultural Catholicism that allowed Gurzau to integrate many aspects of both her Italian identity and her American identity.

Annunziata, Gurzau, and Divination

Despite their roots in Catholicism, both Annunziata and Gurzau, at one point or another, seek answers to their questions through consultation with astrologists or psychics. Annunziata visits "The Cripple," a medium who allows her to speak with her dead husband Geremio. Likewise, Gurzau several times mentions getting her cards read by an astrologer. Both women show their desire and desperation for clarity, even if they must venture beyond traditional Christian doctrinal practices and the Catholic church authorities to find it. This is, seemingly,

more of a significant departure for Annunziata than it is for Gurzau, who is already wandering and exploring different belief systems and paths of enlightenment.

Annunziata's dealings with the medium are often puzzling to readers unfamiliar with the difference between Catholicism and cultural Catholicism. Discerning Annunziata's motives and how she reconciles this act with her Christian convictions necessitates differentiating between the doctrinal Catholic beliefs and Italian vernacular beliefs. We are told that Annunziata first hears of the Cripple's powers through the paesanos, showing that the practice of consulting with the dead was at least somewhat common among this group of Italian immigrants, despite divination being prohibited by the Catholic church.

The Catholic doctrine teaches that heaven and hell are porous, or that the boundaries between earth and the afterlife allow for passage between realms, a movement that would ultimately enable living people to communicate with the dead. The medium herself even seems to believe that she is operating within the Catholic tradition, for she has hanging on the door to her office the sign "Jesus Never Fails" (110). This sign has a calming effect on Annunziata, assuaging her fears that she is somehow sinning by her visit. The medium reports that Geremio says he is happy in "Paradise," thus confirming that she is, in some sense, an agent of God who can bridge the gap between the dead and alive (114).

Ultimately, Annunziata's knowledge of Catholic beliefs allows for the general possibility of divination and consulting the dead, despite the fact that the Catholic catechism[4] and the 1934

[4] The *Catholic Church Catechism* says the following about both of these dealings with mediums and psychics: "All forms of divination are to be rejected: recourse to Satan or demons, conjuring up the dead or other practices falsely supposed to 'unveil' the future. Consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots, the phenomena of clairvoyance, and recourse to mediums all conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings, as well as a wish to conciliate hidden powers. They contradict the honor, respect, and loving fear that we owe to God alone" (Vaticana 2116).

Catechism of the Council of Trent[5], published in New York City, overtly prohibits such practices as these. Cultural Catholicism, on the other hand, was an iteration of the Catholic religion that rejected the authority of Church and made room for the generally superstitious Italians to engage in astrological practices.

Though Gurzau never goes into detail about her card readings or her thoughts about the practice in general, she does several times allude to the fact that her card readings play a role in guiding her decisions. One entry from April of 1933 depicts a reading or fortune told to her, and she says in another entry from January 11, 1934, "My cards indicate lucky changes that ought to come some day or another." The dates of these two mentions of card readings fall on either side of her entry in December 1933 regarding her new enlightenment and understanding of Christian teachings and her attraction to eastern philosophies.

The fact that these two very different Italian American women still venture into "forms of divination" goes back to the problems brought up by Gambino in asking whether any part of the Italian American legacy is a real "authentic religious experience?" (39). Cultural Catholicism is insufficient for both of these women in the American context. In Annunziata's case, religiosity in the form of cultural Catholicism seems to stand in place of a substantial faith, leaving her feeling stranded with a set of beliefs that are ill-suited to her life situations, yet she remains totally unable to explore anything else because of her lack of English proficiency and social mobility. She is burdened by her spiritual responsibilities and ashamed of her failures to raise a

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[5] Catechism of the Council of Trent, Irreverent Speech: "It is also a foul and shameful contamination of the Scripture, that wicked men pervert the words and sentences which it contains, and which should be honored with all reverence, turning them to profane purposes, such as scurrility, fable, vanity, flattery, detraction, *divination*, satire and the like—crimes which the Council of Trent commands to be severely punished" [italics added] (393).

pious son but cannot fabricate a context in which cultural Catholicism will satisfy any questions or bring any spiritual contentment. Gurzau is free from so much of this struggle simply because she is able to be fully Italian and promote Italian culture in America while maintaining autonomy from both the domestic responsibilities and Catholic culture that encumbered so many other immigrant women. The reality is that Gurzau's documented success in maintaining Italian culture in America came only because she did not have the cultural pressures that Annunziata and women like her did.

Gurzau's freedom from cultural Catholicism came from the fact that she was not responsible for passing down traditional religious practices, and she was able to intellectually engage with faith. Annunziata, on the other hand, continues, until the final pages of the novel, to experience moments of confusion and frustration because her faith is unable to address the issues present in Paul's life and the modernizing world around her. In the end, cultural Catholicism is what was killing Annunziata and from what Gurzau was liberated. Both women longed for the freedom to search and question and intellectually engage with theology and ideologies. One was able to do so, and one was not. For Annunziata, dedication to cultural Catholicism ultimately left her dissatisfied and confused.

Like Paul and Gurzau, many Italian immigrants could find harmony and success in the New World only once they had let go of the aspects of their Italian heritage that were tethered to Italy. A form of Catholicism that relied so heavily on Italian culture for relevance could not meet the needs of an ever-modernizing Italian American people. For Annunziata, the lack of depth and universality in her faith left her empty. Gurzau, by virtue of her education and professional freedom, was not relegated to cultural Catholicism but free to begin a search for a faith more responsive to her lived experience.

CONCLUSION

There seems to be an inseparable connection between domestic work and religiosity for Italian American women of the early twentieth century. In the years between 1860 and 1920, when the first major wave of Italian immigrants came to America, they came with the hope that the man of the family would find stable work and that they could escape oppression from an ever-growing ruling class. They came for a lot of the same reasons many other immigrants came to America: to pursue the ideals of social mobility and freedom. The reality of life in the United States ended up looking quite different. Despite often still being confined to dangerous or grueling work, the Italian men were still often free to learn different professions and interact with other immigrants. This freedom to explore their new home, for the men of the first generation, allowed for greater fluency between their cultural identities. Their sense of Italianness was not necessarily diminished within their new context, while the women, their wives, sisters, and mothers, experienced a much different transition. They were transplanted to the New World and given tenements in which to live and work. Their lack of education and inability to gain proficiency in English left a generation of women unable to access much of their city and therefore committed to preserving the Italy and lifestyles of the past. Italy was, in their minds, the only environment in which they could be successful and in which their work was sufficient for a happy, fruitful life.

Despite the political and social unrest surrounding the unification, Italy was still a land of prosperity—cultural if not economic prosperity—to the Italian immigrants. Di Donato takes this further in his interview with Huene-Greenberg by describing how the Italians often thought of their homeland as superior to all others. He says that Italians often “disdained” other ethnic

groups because Italian "food was fresh; they didn't eat fresh food. Our diet was more varied and more imaginative, of course, we were the Catholics, and the Catholics are from Italy, and we're from the land that has the Vatican. What confused me was that Jesus was a Jew, and I thought he was one of our paesanos" (35). The arrogance of Italians made them great, in their eyes. Italy was the standard by which all else should be measured. Coming to the United States was not an abandoning of Italy for the immigrants; it was, in fact, a solution to preserve what was good about Italy by taking the good to a new context before all turned sour. It was the women's job to preserve this good Italy.

The idea that Italy is the birthplace of great culture and the seat of religion is the reason cultural context ended up defining both entities—domesticity and religion—for women of the first generation like Annunziata. Her identity as an Italian woman defines her role and purpose; she has little agency in choosing her own lifestyle, let alone in ascribing worth to her work outside the norms of having a husband to work for and being at home in her own country. Her jobs as an Italian homemaker, cultural preserver, and spiritual leader, in this new context, are untethered to the country that defined them. Annunziata is removed from her Italian context, and thus her responsibilities and functions seem not only out of step with the modernizing American world outside her tenement but also counterproductive in effectively preserving Italian traditions.

As Annunziata's efficacy in domesticity is lost, so too if her ability to be satisfied with her faith. In other words, without its host culture, "the land of the Vatican," Annunziata's tie to cultural Catholicism weakens. As this happens, she would, ideally, be able to replace her inherited cultural Catholicism with some kind of theological depth and more culturally transcendent faith. However, her lack of education, inability to communicate in any other language besides Italian, and her limited social circle means that only fear and confusion fill the

void. Geremio and Italy are the two forces in her life that enable her to remain sequestered in her bubble of domesticity, and they are what preserve a context in which cultural Catholicism makes sense. With Geremio as the benefactor, Annunziata's work within the home has a purpose and provides tangible results in her daily life: she is able to see her family provided for, to use his wages to cook hearty food, and to keep tidy the house he bought. Without Geremio, all of her means for making her domestic work meaningful vanish. In this space without Geremio, but with Annunziata still desperately trying to make meaning out of the life and work she is confined to, we have the scene of Luigi and Cola's wedding. This scene stands out as the only instance in which Annunziata is able to bring Italy to the Lower East Side of Manhattan. In this transplanted Italy, she has work to do, and that work is appreciated and seen. Her paesanos are fed by her cooking of old Italian recipes; they are kept warm by the vibrant company and a fire in the hearth; they are made happy through memories of their homeland and dancing the tarantella. Once the last dishes are cleared away from this feast, however, Annunziata's Italy begins to slip further and further out of reach. The rest of the novel shows her inability to find meaning or sense in her world crumbling with each passing day. Her domestic work rings hollow as her son's health and emotional stability deteriorate. Her confidence in her faith, cultural Catholicism, proves equally dull and dissatisfying. Annunziata's visits to the medium offer a counter experience to the wedding feast in that they show her frantic effort to reinstate one of the primary meaning-makers in her life, Geremio.

Had Annunziata been allowed to find work outside of domesticity and been given the education to be able to intellectually engage with theology and the doctrines of her faith, it is possible that her story would have looked entirely different by the end; there perhaps would have been more hope and more personal satisfaction. These freedoms would have allowed her to help

reconcile these two worlds, Italy and America, for her children, ultimately creating a more harmonized, enriched American experience.

Elba Gurzau was free from this dependency on an Italian context. Her fluency between her two national identities, American and Italian, is a powerful factor in her success and fulfillment. Not only was she free from the confines of domesticity and cultural Catholicism, but, as Sutton says, she was able from an early age "to reconcile and even celebrate her ethnic origins" (4). In fact, the second generation seems to have been largely more focused on the integration of these two cultures as a means of preservation. Only in the second generation did men and women alike begin, in larger numbers, writing down their stories. Because of their work, they and the following generations were able to begin what is now considered the genre of Italian-American literature. Gurzau was allowed and enabled to do all of the things Annunziata could not, and because of it, we see a woman able to work fluently in an American context, while championing Italian values and culture. Gurzau did eventually get married and have children, though Sutton says this choice in no way diminished her involvement in cultural activities (11). By the time she died in June of 2003, Gurzau had spent her entire adult life promoting Italian culture in America—specifically New York City and Philadelphia— and bridging the divides between Old World and New through teaching English to speakers of other languages, training women in the arts, and keeping "alive the folk arts and culture of Italy among Italian-Americans" (Sutton 16). Everything Annunziata strived to attain was able to be accomplished, but only once a generation came along that was not bound by domesticity and not kept blind within a Catholic faith system that only made sense in one cultural context.

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