Dreams of Prosperity in America met with Disillusionments and Despair for Eastern & Southern European Immigrants

Mayda C. Bosco
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
Bosco, Mayda C., "Dreams of Prosperity in America met with Disillusionments and Despair for Eastern & Southern European Immigrants" (2013). Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects. 780.
https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/780
Dreams of Prosperity in America met with Disillusionments and Despair for Eastern & Southern European Immigrants

by

Mayda C. Bosco

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts, English

January 2013

The College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

Department English

Dr. Maria Giura
Thesis Sponsor

Dr. Tom Benediktsson
Committee Member

Dr. Jonathan Greenberg
Committee Member

Dr. Emily Isaacs
Department Chair
Dreams of Prosperity in America met with Disillusionments and Despair for Eastern & Southern European Immigrants

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master’s of American Literature

By

MAYDA C. BOSCO

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2013
Copyright © 2013 by Mayda C. Bosco. All rights reserved.
ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the challenges experienced by destitute Eastern and Southern Europeans after migrating to New York City during the late nineteenth century and into the earlier part of the twentieth century. Throughout their Americanization process, these newcomers confronted difficulties in reconciling old world norms with newfound liberties in the land of opportunity. Religion further complicated their lives in terms of tensions created between their belief systems – Orthodox Judaism and Roman Catholicism – pitted against the practices of the mainstream White Anglo Saxon Protestants. The backdrop of a thriving and consumerism environment in New York City ironically furthered their struggles in that these immigrants lacked the means and skills to economically integrate themselves with New York City’s established population. This situation in turn created a clash of the classes. By extension, the element of exploitation will be explored as each group is vulnerable to mistreatment by various American institutions such as private businesses, religious establishments, and government agencies. All of these harsh realities faced by the immigrants served to dishearten their enthusiastic imaginings towards a better life anticipated in the New World.

Two novels that reflect such immigrant experiences are Bread Givers by Anzia Yezierska and Christ in Concrete by Pietro Di Donato. Both novels will be analyzed throughout this paper in order to explore the contradictions between dreams of prosperity in America met with disillusionments and despair for these Eastern and Southern European immigrants.
Dedicated to
Professor Sharon A. Lewis

Without her encouragement and support, I would not have had the opportunity to fulfill my own dreams in earning a Master’s degree.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to acknowledge my deep gratitude to Dr. Maria Giura as my Thesis Sponsor and to both Dr. Benediktsson and Dr. Greenberg as my Committee Members. I also had the good fortunate of having Dr. Benediktsson and Dr. Greenberg as professors in Graduate School. Their courses were not only fruitful towards my Master’s in American Literature but instrumental in steering me towards a paper focused on Immigration during modern times. To my husband, Phil Bosco, for his unconditional support in urging me to stay the course towards my Master’s despite unanticipated upheavals of our own. And to my four children – Sara, Max, Samson, and Frankie – thank you for tip-toeing around me as I juggled our home, work, and graduate school. To say you handled a stressful time with grace is an understatement. Continue being who you are and in following your own paths towards Individualism.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1: BREAD GIVERS

CHAPTER 2: CHRIST IN CONCRETE

CHAPTER 3: CONCLUSION
INTRODUCTION

Throughout the latter part of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, America experienced a massive increase in its immigrant population. Newcomers migrated to America from countries in parts of Southern and Eastern Europe where many lived under harsh, impoverished, and oppressive conditions. This era of "great migration"—as it is so often referred to—was to a great extent triggered by the seemingly infinite number of job opportunities created by America's manufacturing sector and specifically, within the mass production of consumer items. It is fitting then that mass production for the masses would lead to a mass exodus of Europeans in search of improved living conditions.

However, as these immigrants settled into their new home in America, they struggled with issues that were most likely unanticipated or merely dismissed in light of the chance they would have at the American Dream. Immigrants found themselves questioning their cultural identity as either European or American, or inevitably, in redefining themselves as a hybrid of both. Conflicts and tensions grew within immigrant families as newfound liberties in America were pitted against Old World norms. The dominant Protestant faith in America seemed at odds with the Jewish or Catholic faiths practiced by these immigrants. And the economic difficulties experienced by the newcomers in contrast with the middle to upper income New Yorkers created a clash of the classes. Such types of hurdles faced by immigrants towards their inevitable process of Americanization, and as reflected in many immigrant novels, seemed secondary given the reality of their less than desirable circumstances back in their native homelands. In Vincent Parrillo's textbook, Strangers to These Shores, he underscores this premise by
pointing out that in "trying to eke out an existence amid poverty, unemployment, sickness, and tyranny, many of Europe's poor looked elsewhere for a better life. Letters from friends or relatives already in the United States were read eagerly and circulated among villagers. Newspapers, books, pamphlets, transportation advertisements, and labor-recruiting agents all stimulated 'America fever'” (124). A feverish imagination of prosperity in America then took hold in motivating many of these European families to migrate to the land of opportunity.

It is in the contradictions between the enthusiastic imaginings these immigrants held and the harsh realities they faced upon arrival in America as poor immigrants that this paper will explore. Two immigrant novels that reflect such contradictions are Bread Givers by Anzia Yezierska and Christ in Concrete by Pietro Di Donato. It is also important to note that both of these novels are widely considered as semi-autobiographical works. Bread Givers (1925) is a fictional novel of an immigrant, Orthodox Jewish family from Eastern Europe living under impoverished conditions in New York City's Lower East Side and whose main character, Sara Smolinsky, is a defiant young female. Sara is determined to shed Old World customs, including expectations placed on women of her culture, in order to seek her sense of individualism. Notably, the trait of individualism was closely associated with the process of Americanization. Christ in Concrete (1939), tells the story of Paul who as a young twelve-year-old child of poor Italian immigrants toils long days in the construction industry in order to support his family after the untimely death of his father and whose family also resides in the tenements of the Lower East Side. Like Sara Smolinsky of Bread Givers, Paul - whose family surname is absent from the novel - eventually also
defies Old World customs in order to pursue his own sense of identity and American individualism. Of consequence, the imaginings and/or mournful recalling of each immigrant’s native homeland will also be addressed as the characters in each of the novels experience a less than alluring life in America while questioning its promises.

The similarities between the two stories however depart when Sara breaks away from her family in order to follow her dreams. She eventually succeeds in becoming a teacher – a white collar occupation – whereas Paul remains steeped in a blue collar environment while continuing to provide for his family. As such, Bread Givers is often referred to as a fairy tale type novel in that the main character’s dreams are eventually fulfilled whereas Christ in Concrete cements itself as a Proletarian novel given that Paul’s status never moves beyond that of a laborer. Taking care of his family, rather than pursuing his own dreams, is Paul’s cross to bear in part due to traditional Italian customs. For Italian immigrants, as is pointed out in Strangers to These Shores, “relatives were the principal focus of social life. Moreover, individual achievement (a U.S. tradition) was not strongly encouraged. More important were family honor, group stability, social cohesion, and cooperation. Each member of the family was expected to contribute to the economic well-being of the family unit” (Parrillo 141). While Sara’s character also experiences similar cultural pressures, she leaves her family at a time when her parents do not have to care for children and when Sara’s mother can fend for herself as a “bread winner.” Unlike for Paul, his seven younger siblings and widowed mother rely on him for financial support.

Just like the Smolinskys and Paul’s family, many of the Southern and Eastern Europeans who migrated to New York City during the late nineteenth century and into
the earlier part of the twentieth century were poor and unskilled workers. As such, they gravitated towards the kinds of low wage employment found either in textile factories - also known as sweatshops - or in the booming construction industry as high risers began outlining the New York City skies. The jobs were not only low paying, but arduous and hazardous as well. According to Nancy Hewitt and Kirsten Delegard, “at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States was the most dangerous country in the world in which to labor: conditions deteriorated as demands for profits escalated. New technology and long working hours combined with a complete absence of regulatory oversight to create a deadly mix for the thousands of American workers killed on the job each year” (47). It was not until 1970 that The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, more commonly known as OSHA, was created and federal standards of workplace safety established (www.osha.gov).

Nevertheless, new immigrants still struggling with poverty in America, settled in lower-income sections of New York City such as the run-down tenement buildings of the Lower East Side. Dominick Cavallo describes in detail the setting of the Lower East Side tenements in his text “Private Lives/Public Moments: Readings in American History” which provides a context for the circumstances faced by the characters in Bread Givers and Christ in Concrete:

To be sure, New York City in 1900 was a densely populated, difficult place for working-class and immigrant families. It was by far the nation’s largest city, with 4.7 million residents in 1910. More than 70 percent of New York’s residents were immigrants and their children. Many lived on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, [which] had thirty-seven blocks with at least 3,000 inhabitants; more than 400,000
people lived between the Battery and Houston Street. Of the city’s 81,000 residential dwellings, 35,000 were dilapidated tenements with at least 1.5 million people living in them. They were poorly ventilated, often without direct sunlight, and frequently lacking adequate indoor plumbing. None had electricity – as late as 1907, only about 8 percent of the country’s residential buildings were wired for electricity. (72-73)

Manhattan’s geography was not the only factor distancing the destitute immigrants living in the tenements of the Lower East Side from the middle and upper class New Yorkers situated further uptown – the American Dreamscape. The socio-economic differences were but one of several aspects distinguishing the two groups. Issues such as language barriers, the struggle to maintain or shed old world traditions, restrictive religious practices, ethnic customs deemed as strange to the dominant White Anglo-Saxons of the time, and the assuming of a new identity in America, all contributed towards tensions between the immigrants and the New Yorkers long settled into an established American way of life. Regardless, these newly arrived immigrants and the established New Yorkers often crossed paths throughout their daily lives simply due to the fact that they lived and worked in the same city but when their lives intersected, it was frequently more so on a collision course as a result of disparate social classes and an unfamiliarity (or intolerance) with each other’s differing ethnic backgrounds. The news of America’s great prosperity that these immigrants so often heard about while living in their native lands then seemed more like a distant dream as their fantasies of grand riches evaporated into the harsh realities of a continued impoverished existence while sensing an unwelcoming reception in the New World. Nativism to a large extent furthered a sense
of hostility and unfriendliness towards the immigrants, especially with the rise of Eugenics. The belief that Northern Europeans were a superior group of people than the Eastern and Southern Europeans served to fan the flames of racism in America. Whiteness became the exclusive domain of Anglo Saxons while everyone else was deemed as non-White.

In essence, one hardscrabble mode of living was replaced with another for these immigrants, albeit under a different form of government that offered the possibility and hopes for improved living conditions, however grueling a process. The imagined prosperity was more likely a possibility for the following generation born in America rather than for the poor, newly arrived. Exhausting working conditions, a deteriorating economy, and an unhealthy living environment made achieving prosperity practically unreachable. As noted in the textbook, *Out of Many: A History of the American People*:

Nearly all the new Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Jewish, and Greek immigrants lacked industrial skills. They thus entered the bottom ranks of factories, mines, mills, and sweatshops. Workers in the urban garment trades toiled for low wages and suffered layoffs, unemployment, and poor health. New York City had become the center of both Jewish immigration and America’s huge ready-to-wear clothing industry. The garment industry was highly seasonal. A typical workweek was sixty hours with seventy common during the busy season. But there were long stretches of unemployment in slack times. Often forced to work in cramped, dirty, and badly lit rooms, garment workers strained under a system in which time equaled money. (587-589)
These immigrants then disembarked not only with the upheavals of migrating in tow but also in exacerbating their circumstances when job-seeking given their limited occupational skills. Furthermore, navigating their way around learning a new language, new laws, new currency, and new cultural norms became additional hurdles to overcome.

An element that may not have been entirely unfamiliar to these newly arrived immigrants would be found in America’s overarching patriarchal society insofar as general expectations placed on masculinity and womanhood. When these immigrants unpacked their own cultural sensibility towards a patriarchal society upon arrival, their Old World norms only served to reinforce an already existing system of patriarchy in America.

Not coincidentally, “the pattern found almost everywhere in the world is patriarchy (‘rule of fathers’), a form of social organization in which males dominate females. The justification for patriarchy is sexism, the belief that one sex is innately superior to the other. Sexism is not just a matter of individual attitudes; it is built into the institutions of society. Institutional sexism is found throughout the economy, with women concentrated in low-paying jobs” (Macionis, Sociology 332). While both the male and female characters in Bread Givers and in Christ in Concrete indeed work in low paying jobs in America, it is interesting to point out that one of the disabled male characters in Christ in Concrete is cast alongside the subordinate role of the female characters who happen to labor in their homes and primarily for the textile industry. It is also of importance to note that:

within the immigrant communities, gender played an important role in the organization of economic activities. Although men sought employment in a
variety of occupations, cultural norms dictated that married women should not work outside the home. Indeed, less than 5 percent did so in 1890, often only because their husbands were disabled, missing, or unemployed. Typically, the wife’s role was to maintain the home. If family needs required her income because the children were too young to work, then she would take on work at home (for example, laundry, sewing, or crafts) or else care for boarders (a common practice given the high number of male immigrants). (Parrillo 146-47)

Indeed, both novels, *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* complement each other in examining the contradictory imaginings versus realities in migrating to New York City and as experienced by Southern and Eastern Europeans during the early 1900s as well as their intersections (or clashes) with the established New Yorkers of the time. It was a time in America’s history when Jewish and Italian immigrants were often collapsed together in the collective imagination in terms of their otherness that set them apart from the established New Yorkers. Ethnicity itself is defined as “*a shared cultural heritage. People define themselves – or others – as members of an ethnic category based on common ancestry, language, or religion that gives them a distinctive social identity*” (Macionis 360). Several social strands linked the ethnicities of the Jewish Smolinskys of *Bread Givers* with that of the Italian, Roman Catholic characters in *Christ in Concrete*. They lived among each other in an immigrant enclave of rundown tenement buildings located in New York City’s section of the Lower East Side. The types of occupations they sought also overlapped, namely working within the textile industry or in the construction trade and at a time when working conditions within these industries were quite hazardous.
Their differences in appearance also served to separate them from the mainstream Northern European American groups. *Bread Givers* provides an image (between pages ten and eleven of the novel) which depicts how an Orthodox Rabbi would typically dress and his manner of behavior. A heavy beard, dark clothing, dark hat, and sullen countenance are all conveyed in the image. For Paul in *Christ in Concrete*, the young Roman Catholic immigrant sports tools of the construction trade as a marker that he is a laborer, which in turn places him on the lower socio-economic status as well. He is described as "wearing man's clothes and having broad brick-flattened hands, and [looking] no more than his slender fifteen. Brick in left hand and trowel in right” (Di Donato 157). Other differences would be heard in their manner of speaking English and witnessed in their celebrations of customs and traditions from the Old World. Suffice it to say that many social hurdles were in place for America's immigrants and particularly those from Eastern Europe and Italy.

Bread itself is another element that links both novels since so many immigrants ventured to America in search of generous sustenance that was lacking in their native lands. Consequently, "one million Poles came to the United States between 1899 and 1914, fleeing poverty and seeking economic opportunity. In fact, the desire for economic improvement was so common to almost all the new immigrants that the English expression 'after bread' is found in the vocabularies of most Central and East Europeans who migrated to the United States” (Parrillo 133). But as stated earlier, these immigrants often traded one set of difficult circumstances for another. The Smolinsky family of *Bread Givers*, with barely enough to eat given Rabbi Smolinsky's refusal to work in order to tend exclusively to his faith, creates an environment, or rather recreates, the
anxiety of facing hunger. As Mrs. Smolinksy states early on in the narrative: “That today we’re eating the last loaf of bread” (Yezierska 10). In the book *How We Found America*, Magdalena J. Zaborowska indicates that:

The metaphor of hunger is often a key to Yezierska’s characters, who are starved for human kindness, respect, and appreciation. The uncritical vision of a Promised Land that offers nourishment, a land flowing with milk and honey, one that made them cross the Atlantic with the “huddled masses,” is replaced with a conviction of the permanence of unfulfillment: “America of my dreams never was and never could be.” In Yezierska’s writings, the cherished rhetoric of the American Dream available to all struggles with the disillusioning language describing an America-Arcadia that can never be attained; the dominant narrative of passage and renewal is juxtaposed to a subject depicting a failure of the American Dream in the newcomer, whose ‘journey of discovery’ leads to the realization that there is a disparity between immigrant rhetoric and everyday life”.

(123 – 24)

For Paul’s family in *Christ in Concrete*, it is the quest for a better mode of living in the land of plenty that actually works against the family. Paul’s grieving mother collapses fear and religion with ethnicity of origin in describing the crisis of having lost her husband to a gruesome construction accident: “Bread – bread of Job and job of Bread has crushed your feet from the ground and taken our eyes from the sun” (Di Donato 33). It should then be no wonder that food itself is of great significance in both novels. Meager portions of food are often contrasted with excess amounts to underscore an inconsistency of provisions. A sweet is treasured in *Bread Givers* as Sara indicates:
“Mother’s precious jar of jelly which she always kept ready for company, even in the blackest times, when we ourselves had nothing to eat” (Yezierska 5). And after Paul seeks help from the local Church for food to feed his starving mother and siblings, he is given a “good portion of cake” while the priest feasts on “baked potatoes, and cuts of brown dripping lamb and fresh peas and platters of hot food cool food hard food soft food” (Di Donato 57).

Lastly, an inequitable capitalist system in America works against the child characters in both novels in that they were exploited into working long days and at the expense of an education. Without an education, it would be difficult to raise their socio-economic level from poor to at least middle class. Yet for their counterparts, the established American children of the time, “young people, who had once joined the labor force in their teens, now discovered adolescence as a stage of life. A high school education was no longer uncommon, and college attendance increased” (Brands et al. 640). Even though child labor laws did exist during the time period of these novels, they were actually met with resistance from struggling immigrant parents and with a lack of enforcement from officials. Sara was as young as ten years old when she first ventured out in search of work and Paul was twelve when he entered the construction trade. The text Out of Many indicates that “the [child labor laws] were weakened by many exemptions and no provisions for enforcement, as lawmakers also heard the loud complaints from parents and mill owners who resented the efforts of reformers to limit their choices” (Faragher et al. 595-596). As a result, many immigrant children worked in factories or in the construction trade while their native-born counterparts attended school.
Parrillo quotes an Austrian Jewish immigrant who came to the U.S. in 1914 at age seventeen:

*Working conditions were terrible, terrible. If you have to sit two-three hours overtime for ten cents, what can I explain you? It don't get worse. But these ten cents I need. Whenever it was overtime, I was the first one to raise my hand. The boss watches you. You shouldn't talk to one another. He watches you between lunch and supper, you know. So you want something, you have something in your drawer like candy. He watches. No, no, no nothing. You can't eat while you're working. So, you watch, you put the candy in your mouth. It was so hot in the shop, the sweat was running from the body and from the hand and the material got stained. The boss didn't care, the foreman didn't care. Once, two policemen came in. They stopped the power. They said we couldn't work in such a heat. You haven't even got a fan here to have a little coolness. Nothing! People used to faint. Big people used to faint. In winter – it was such a hard winter. When I opened the door in the morning to go to work, I couldn't take away my hand from the knob – the frost. Terrible. Terrible. At work in the big shop in the middle was a stove. It kept us a little warm. But, you know, young people, young blood – we put on a sweater. Yeah, the conditions was terrible. Can't be worse. Can't be worse. It was terrible. And the boss had a fresh mouth always for the workers.*

(125)

Both *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* are often referred to as fairy tales given the fantasies entertained by the characters in that a fabled America will provide them with better living conditions. This notion is followed by the struggles the immigrants realize
upon arrival. And in the end, the characters resign themselves to their circumstances in America, however hardscrabble they may remain. While this may not necessarily provide a happily-ever-after ending, the novels do reflect the ruptures families experienced when migrating to the New World, the transformation in evolving from poor and to achieving some level of success in America, even at the expense of irreplaceable losses. As such, the novels question if coming to the New World was even worth the effort. Disparities between the newly arrived and mainstream Americans such as the oppressiveness of Old World values, ethnic differences, gender inequalities, battling poverty, class clashes, and dealing with exploitive working conditions will be addressed in the analysis of Bread Givers and Christ in Concrete. However, given that neither of the characters return to their native homelands, it is then up to the present day reader to reconcile the sacrifices made by these early immigrants as a testament to America as the land of Immigrants. The contradictions between fantastical imaginings and harsh realities experienced are simply part and parcel of the immigrant experience.
CHAPTER 1

Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"
—Emma Lazarus, “The New Colossus” (1883)

Bread Givers

Published in 1925 and written by Anzia Yezierska, Bread Givers tells the story of the Smolinsky family, a destitute Eastern European family that migrates to America during the late 19th, early 20th century. This time period happens to coincide with Yezierska’s arrival in America in 1893 at the age of 13. It also overlaps with the era known as the period of great migration to America due to economic and/or political hardships in Southern and Eastern Europe. As was the case for many immigrants, the Smolinskys are in search of the American dream—or “bread” as symbolic of a fruitful economic achievement beyond that of a basic sustenance—yet their arrival to the United States lands them in the Lower East Side of New York City. This area at the time was primarily an enclave made up of lower socio-economic immigrants living in run-down tenement buildings and within environmentally hazardous conditions. In many regards, the Smolinskys trade one set of destitute circumstances for another upon arrival in America.

The patriarch of the family, Reb Smolinsky, an observant Orthodox Jewish rabbi, zealously believes that his dedication to God is his rightful labor. As such, he devotes his entire time to scripture and religious obligations, which in turn, eliminates him as a
financial provider for his struggling family. Even as his family’s financial health deteriorates to almost non-existent, Rabbi Smolinsky remains inflexible in his stance. He does not budge from his convictions regardless of his family’s dire straits and refuses to seek work outside of tending to his faith. The toil for economic improvement is then left to his wife and their four daughters – all uneducated and unskilled workers. Their wages do not suffice to cover their costs of living and so resort to taking on boarders as a means to pay for their monthly rent - at the very minimum. For the most part, the women in Rabbi Smolinsky’s family begrudgingly yield to his demands as that of a non financial provider. Given this storyline in Bread Givers, Yezierska debunks the illusion that men were oftentimes the primary financial “bread winner” within the immigrant community of this era. The critic Kevin Piper states that:

One of the most significant values Yezierska isolates within the Jewish community is that of “giving bread.” The novel identifies this idea in an extended community of Jewish immigrant women who give of themselves to support one another as well as their families. Nominally, the novel refers to Sara’s father Reb Smolinsky and other men in the community as “bread givers.” But nearly every man in the novel turns out a pretender to that title [and] fail to provide much at all to their wives and children. The Smolinsky women, along with neighborhood women, invert this gendered division of labor as the novel reveals them as the true providers. (112)

Within this context, Mrs. Smolinsky and her daughters are forced to work arduously in factories whenever they are able to find work or to care for boarders in order to support themselves. Their efforts in turn free Rabbi Smolinsky to tend to his faith and
responsibilities as a Rabbi, which include attending social events of leisure at religiously related lodges. Of consequence, the membership fees paid to such lodges are covered by the wages earned by the Smolinsky women. Sara Smolinsky, the narrator and main character, describes her life and that of her sisters in comparison to their father’s: “We’d come home worn and tired from working hard all day and there was Father with a clear head from his dreams of the Holy Torah, and he’d begin to preach to each and every one of us our different sins that would land us in hell” (Yezierska 65). Privileging the patriarchal code in this instance is borrowed from biblical verse that advocates for women to obey and learn from men as justification for Mr. Smolinsky’s demands that his wife and daughters work while he tends to scripture: “it says in the Torah, only through a man has a woman an existence. Only through a man can a woman enter Heaven” (137).

With the ultimate goal of gaining entrance to heaven as religious dogma, this tenet controls the expected gender roles for the Smolinsky family; one that privileges the patriarch. This circumstance further intensifies the struggles for the Smolinsky women.

Regardless, Mrs. Smolinsky places all of her faith in her husband as he sketches out a life for them in America filled with his own illusions (delusions) of grandeur. Mrs. Smolinsky’s practical desires of setting sail for America with basic amenities from her native home such as a “pot for gefulte fish, and two feather beds” (9) that would at least provide some basic comforts in a strange, new land are met with resistance from her husband:

“Woman!” Father said, laughing into her eyes. “What for will you need old feather beds? Don’t you know it’s always summer in America? And in the new golden country, where milk and honey flow free in the streets, you’ll have new
golden dishes to cook in, and not weigh yourself down with your old pots and pans. But my books, my holy books always were, and always will be, the light of the world. You'll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn.” (9)

Mrs. Smolinsky yields to her husband’s fantastical imaginings of America only to find herself living in filth, eating stale bread, on the edge of homelessness, and begging her husband to seek employment so that they can at the very least provide their children with proper clothing during the harsh New York City winters.

As Sara continually works to help support her family—beginning as early as the age of ten selling herrings as a street vendor—she increasingly becomes more defiant of the expectations placed on her by her family, her culture of origin, and her Orthodox faith. Experiencing life in America throughout her growing adolescent years, Sara observes a world around her in which children attend school, women enjoy a sense of independence, and an adherence to faith appears to be practiced in a much more relaxed fashion than the manner in which she is accustomed to. Sara then struggles to remain loyal to her family and their cultural expectations while exploring American customs that she finds liberating. Her quest for independence from Old World norms creates family conflict and tension in that Sara begins to conduct herself outside of the cultural expectations placed on her as an Eastern European and Orthodox Jewish woman; one who would primarily serve the roles of mother and wife whether it be in America or back in her native homeland. Instead, she searches for her own sense of individualism as is encouraged in America in her attempts to obtain an education. Had Sara been born a son, this same goal would have more than likely been met with support from her family rather than discord. Not surprisingly, Sara’s determination in seeking her personal goals is as
steadfast as the resolve in which Rabbi Smolinsky unwaveringly adheres to his own needs – each at the expense of their family’s economic health. However, had Rabbi Smolinsky lessened the financial burden for his family by also working, Sara may not have been as eager to eventually venture on her own. When Sara ultimately does leave, her mother is then burdened as the sole “bread winner” of the household.

In countering her family’s cultural expectations, Sara dreams of finishing school, attending college, and becoming a teacher. Additionally, she insists on the freedom to marry a man of her own choosing rather than agreeing to a husband hand-picked by her father as is the case for Sara’s sisters and customary within their religious norms. Rabbi Smolinsky succeeds in marrying three of his daughters to men who by all appearances are well-off business men and, who can not only provide a living for his daughters, but for the Rabbi as well. This continued financial support to the family’s patriarch from each son-in-law is expected in exchange for the lost wages he suffers once his daughters are married and no longer living at home. Absent from these arranged marriages is the element of love and by extension, a lack of personal, emotional fulfillment for Sara’s sisters. Eventually, inasmuch as Rabbi Smolinsky swindles his own family out of generating an income, each of the men he picks for his three daughters deceive him out of any illusions of riches. They do not provide him with any form of financial support and furthermore, serve to weigh down his daughters with unsatisfying marriages in their new “golden” homes. As Sara witnesses the fates bestowed upon her sisters, she becomes even more determined to defy these types of expectations placed on Orthodox Jewish women by seeking her own independence. It is in this strife, coupled with the lack of
economic improvement, that causes the Smolinsky family to question their imaginings of a much improved life in America.

The events that unfold for the fictional Smolinsky family in *Bread Givers* reflects the experiences endured by hundreds of thousands of poor immigrants from Eastern Europe who settled in New York City’s Lower East Side during the 1900s. The conditions of the run-down tenement buildings were squalor like. Tenants took in boarders in order help make ends meet. Children of immigrants in their pre-teen years worked full days and at the expense of an education. And Orthodox Jewish men and women were expected to continue their Old World norms in America. In reflecting such events, Anzia Yezierska is described in the book, *How We Found America*, as a Polish Jewish immigrant author [who] emerges in the 1920s as a new voice in the tradition of East European women’s writing. Yezierska’s skillful use of these well-established narrative models to construct popular ‘immigrant realism’ – vivid pictures of the Lower East Side and its Jewish inhabitants presented in a stylized English-Yiddish dialect – produced a variety of texts, from short stories, to novels, to autobiographies, all of which also lend themselves to close readings and inquires into narrative subtexts... however, Yezierska makes the issues of gender and authorship not only central but pivotal for her books depicting female Americanization. (Zaborowska 115)

Further complicating matters for these immigrants, by the time *Bread Givers* was published “large corporations, no longer-dependent on armies of unskilled immigrant workers, did not object to the 1924 [Immigration] law, National Origins Quota Act (limiting immigration from Europe); the machine had replaced the immigrant on the
assembly line” (Brands et al. 647). This in turn created further financial hardship in that jobs became less plentiful than in previous decades, yet hundreds of thousands of immigrants had settled in America in search of work; many of them concentrated in New York City.

As Sara grapples with the reality of her family’s meager existence, in large part due to her father’s refusal to seek work, she attempts to establish her own sense of identity in America beyond that of an Orthodox Jewish woman, daughter, and financial provider for her needy family. She struggles with reconciling these different elements that make up the young woman she is and with the woman she wants to become – a teacher. In order to do so, Sara is painfully aware that she must move away from her family, both culturally and literally. This becomes evident when Sara indicates to her mother that she wants to “work [herself] up for a school teacher in America” and is met with resistance given Old World norms: “I’d be happier to see you get married. What’s a school teacher? Old maids – all of them. It’s good enough for Goyim, but not for you” (Yezierska 172). Unfortunately for Sara, so long as she lives at home, all of her wages must be surrendered to her parents. Sara is then keenly aware that in order to pursue her goal, her earnings must be set aside to provide for herself along with her schooling. In essence, she would then experience the Americanization process towards individualism. As a consequence, in no longer providing for her family, financial difficulties for Sara’s impoverished mother are then further complicated. Additionally, Sara must confront her domineering father in informing him that she is preparing to set out on her own. This further disrupts the imaginings of a “golden” America for the Smolinsky family.
With Sara preparing to leave home by the time she is seventeen, Rabbi Smolinsky is distraught at the thought that his daughter will be venturing on her own given his belief system. According to the Rabbi’s interpretation of the Torah, women who do not live with a man, are then denied entry into heaven. Sara asserts her position with: “I’m smart enough to look out for myself. It’s a new life now. In America, women don’t need men to boss them. I’ve got to live my own life. It’s enough that Mother and the others lived for you. My will is as strong as yours. I’m going to live my own life. Nobody can stop me. I’m not from the old country. I’m American!” (137 – 38). Her father responds with a slap to her face and with that, Sara walks out of her home in search of pursuing her dreams such as women in America can. As Kevin Piper notes, “central to the novel, Jewish tradition mediates the generational strife between father and daughter, as seen in Reb Smolinsky’s parting words: ‘You blasphemer!... Denier of God! I’ll teach you respect for the law!’ By leaving her father for the university, Sara appears to be trading in this Jewish heritage for secular culture” (114). Zaborowska adds:

Yezierska shows that the immigrant woman of the early twentieth century who desires a career beyond the sweatshop and the chores of a domestic is treated like a person out of her mind, since she longs for the impossible – a fairy tale ending to the story which from the start presupposes a “realistic” narrative of manual labor and lower-class existence for the alien female. (120 – 21)

While Sara grapples with the quest to pursue her own dreams in America and by extension, forming a new identity, this was also a time when Americans themselves were questioning their own sense of identity given the age of consumerism. Items such as cars and household appliances gave way to leisure which was considered a commodity within
itself and an item that collided with traditional, American, hard-working values. A sense of the “haves and have nots” began to grow across the country, in both metropolitan and rural areas, based on the “things” afforded to middle and upper class Americans, including that of leisure time. This lent a sense of socio-economic and social distress since the ownership of consumer items and one’s social status became deeply connected in the collective imagination. Of consequence, “by 1929 [Americans] spent vast sums on washing machines, vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, and ranges. The new appliances made housework easier and ushered in an age of leisure. The economics of mass production drove the country forward but the persistent appeal of individualism and rural based values held it back” (Brands et al., 638, 651). As such, traditional American rural values that were family and farm based, conflicted with the more cosmopolitan sensibility towards a sense of individualism. This was due to the fear that in seeking one’s own personal pursuits, a by-product of leisure, that the individual would then privilege their own needs over loyalties to family. This in and of itself created a rift between traditional, or conservative, and progressive Americans let alone for newly arrived, impoverished immigrants who were also trying to maintain their own traditional family values that steered away from individualism.

Still, while Americans grappled with their own sense of identity as traditionalists versus progressives given the privileges of modernity, the newly arrived and poor immigrants attempted to assimilate into a new, conflicting, and unfamiliar world wherein leisure, in whatever form, also folded into their lives. The forms of leisure available to the immigrants also created a sense of “have and have nots” among themselves. In essence, the stratification of class consciousness coincided not only between the
Americans and the lower socio-economic Immigrants, but within each group and further stratified by gender. Indeed, “women had to fit their entertainment into their work, rather than around it. Washing and laundry, supervising children at play, or shopping at the local market, women might find a few moments to socialize with neighbors. For many immigrants, however, participation in urban recreation was part of the broader experience of Americanization” (Cavallo 81, 83). This is important to highlight in the sense that however poor these immigrants were, different forms of leisure played a role in not only escaping their hardscrabble mode of living if only for a weekend afternoon, but also in immigrant children playing out the Americanization process, however much an irritant that may have been to many Eastern European immigrant parents. As noted in *Women, Families, and Communities*:

Contestation over leisure, social freedom, and dating was also heightened by the inevitable cultural conflicts between the American-born or educated youth and their immigrant parents, who clung to Old World traditions. Lillian Wald noted that the Americanized wage-earning daughter “willingly gave her earnings and paid tribute to her mother’s devotion and housekeeping skill, [but] said she felt irritated and mortified every time she returned to her home.” The emergent consumer culture, with its beguiling modernity, challenged parental authority over manners and mores. Women attentively read the advertisements and commentary about personal appearance printed in the working-class dailies, even in the socialist press: the *Jewish Daily Forward* noted in 1915. Increasingly, as young people chose forms of entertainment identified with American culture, parents
who had previously decried cheap dance halls and theaters slowly acquiesced to them. (Hewitt, Delegard 85)

Unfortunately for Sara, her new life initially lacked any form of leisure when she set out on her journey towards Americanization. Exacerbating her efforts, she moves out of her parents’ home during wintertime leaving her essentially homeless under inclement conditions until she can find a new place to live. She eventually settles into a drab living space within a tenement building, works long hours ironing fabrics while barely earning enough wages to support herself, manages to attend school in the evening, and spends her sleeping hours hunched over books by candlelight while strained by the lack of heat in her dingy living quarters.

Sara’s persistence in enduring such an existence was grounded in her drive to achieve her own personal American dream. Her goal consisted of completing the necessary school requirements in order to attend college and earn her teaching degree. Throughout this hardship, Sara meets a love interest, Max Goldstein, who provides her with a temporary escape from her harsh realities by introducing her to various forms of leisure, i.e., vaudeville theatres, dance clubs, and fine dining. He dazzles her with his sense of self-importance and amazing money making schemes—somewhat reminiscent of her father and the men he chooses for her sisters—and asks Sara that she dismiss her dreams in exchange to be his wife given all the riches he can provide her. With his dismissive proposal, “only dumbheads fool themselves that education and colleges and all that sort of nonsense will push them on in the world. It’s money that makes the wheels go round. With my money I can have college graduates working for me. I can hire them and fire them. And they, with all their education, are under my feet just
because I got the money” (Yeizerska 199). Sara rejects him with the realization that “to him, a wife would only be another piece of property” (199) but is nevertheless left disheartened that Max’s swindling and self-importance blind him from validating her dreams. In refusing to live a life where her love for learning would not be held to the highest of standards and be just as equally important to her partner as his interests are to him, Sara invokes the teachings she learned from her father, but lessons intended for men, not women. Still, determinedly, Sara thinks to herself: “I looked at the books on my table that had stared at me like enemies a little while before. They were again the life of my life. Ach! Nothing was so beautiful as to learn, to know, to master by the sheer force of my will. I seized my books and hugged them to my breast as though they were living things” (201). Nothing, not even love, was going to keep her from her mission to learn.

Much like Sara Smolinsky, Anzia Yeizerska also ventured out on her own by the age of 20 in order to escape cultural restrictions placed on her by her family and begin the transformation from Immigrant to American. In the text “The Life and Work of Anzia Yeizerska” biographer Bettina Berch indicates that “it was 1900 when Yeizerska left home. This was not a typical move for a twenty-year old unmarried Jewish daughter, but perhaps she was tired of dodging the marriage matches her father was suggesting. She found safe haven at the Clara de Hirsch Home (CHH), founded by philanthropists Oscar and Sarah Straus and the Baroness Clara de Hirsch in 1897” (33). Such types of homes were known as Settlement Houses which were for the most part, organized by German Jews who had migrated to America much earlier than the Eastern European Jews and who were already established into the American way of life by the time Yeizerska’s
family arrived in America. The Settlement Houses doubled as social gathering centers and as facilities that provided social services for the newly arrived Jewish immigrants. As Berch points out, “the goals of the Home were to provide a self-supporting lifestyle for working girls and homemaking skills for future wives. In the eyes of the organizers, these were but a single goal, since paid work, even in domestic service, was seen as a brief interlude in a girl’s life before marriage” (33).

Unlike Sara Smolinsky’s hardscrabble existence as an independent young woman, Anzia Yezierska lived at the Hirsch Home benefitting from the organization’s goodwill. Yezierska did not endure the down and out destitute conditions she scripted for Sara Smolinsky. Instead, Yezierska took advantage of such Settlement Houses in helping her bridge the gap between being a single, Orthodox Jewish, Immigrant woman, and the Americanization process. Yezierska applied to be a boarding trainee at the Home. All girls who lived at the home had private bedrooms, and could use the Home’s laundry facilities, sewing rooms, visiting rooms and medical services. Everyone took English classes in addition to vocational training. Meals were served in a group dining room. The Home facilitated the girls’ dating, and even marriages and intermarriages, especially when they married “up,” above their social status. (35)

But much criticism exists that these Settlement Houses were actually built in order to Anglicize the more observant Orthodox Jews and to mainstream them into American life. Gender politics in terms of expected roles for men and women of the time also play a role in such criticism. Yezierska undoubtedly counters these expectations by depicting Sara as a spirited Orthodox Jewish woman who forges ahead independently rather than
through charitable means that would indoctrinate her to acquiesce to Max Goldstein's proposal.

Domesticity was the focal point in the teachings of the Settlement Houses for these young, Orthodox Jewish women and which Yezierska resented given the spatial restrictions placed on women of the time verses the accepted freedom of movement for men. Women were pressured into tending to their homes while also caring for their children and household chores while the expectation for men was that they would seek work outside of the home thereby removing themselves not only from the confinements of the proverbial four walls, but also from the exhaustive physical care of their children. Even more so for poor, immigrant mothers who had very little financial means for mobility and who oftentimes, cared for their home and children while earning wages within the home by whatever methods available at the time, i.e., taking in boarders, taking on garment work, etc. Whereas the men working outside of the home, were then provided with a more socially liberating sense of spatial mobility. These types of social pressures burdening immigrant women to the home and domesticity further emphasized adhering to patriarchal norms within America and that Yezeirska found demeaning. In the article, "Literary Reformers: Scholar Carol Batker claims that

Gender politics were an integral part of immigrant aid and settlement house work and significantly affected debates over race/ethnicity and class positioning. As providers and recipients of immigrant aid, Jewish women were strongly influenced by debates over women's domestic and wage-earning labor. By the 1920s, domestic ideals were being challenged by various versions of New Womanhood, which situated women in the work force. The New Woman of the
early twentieth century is generally described as concerned with “self-
development as contrasted to self-sacrifice or submergence in the family.”

Yezierska, for example, used immigrant New Women to oppose the elitism and
ethnocentrism of settlement domestic training. Yezierska’s protagonists
ultimately revise reform ideology, rejecting domesticity and domestic service in
favor of other forms of wage labor. (83-85)

It is in this “favor of other forms of wage labor” that Yezierska most likely scripted Sara
as not accepting help from a Settlement House even though Bread Givers is referred to as
her semi-autobiographical work. Possibly, Sara is symbolic of the “real” type of
immigrant, Orthodox Jewish woman Yezierska yearned to be; one who fearlessly staked
her independence. One such example can be found when Sara is just about penniless but
literally starving. She enters a cafeteria with hopes of eating at least one nutritious meal
with whatever money she has remaining. Sara asks for a bowl of stew piled with meat
but is instead served a small portion and returns it asking that the bowl be properly filled.
When a heaping portion is served, Sara mistakes the bowl as hers. It was instead
intended for a male customer. Outraged over the incident, she asks if her “money [is] as
good as his” only to hear “don’t you know they always give men more?” (Yezierska 168
– 69). Rather than yielding to an unjust, sexist circumstance, Sara marches out of the
eatery and resolves to eat whatever bread she has left in her room. Sara’s pride,
determination, and independence counter the traits the Settlement Houses sought to instill
in women such as Yezierska. Given her resentment towards the goals of the Settlement
Houses, it then becomes clear that Yezierska scripted Sara as one who would not gently
yield to the kind of gender politics she encountered in the cafeteria.
As Sara’s character shifts towards her sense of Americanization in gaining her independence, it is of critical importance to note that during this same time period, America was shifting its views on Immigrants. The realities of the American backdrop at the time were that:

Nativism, or hostility to things foreign, found its most successful outlet in the immigration legislation of the 1920s. The declining percentage of Nordic immigrants alarmed writers such as Madison Grant, who warned the American people that lesser breeds with inferior genes were about to overwhelm the Anglo-Saxon stock that had founded the nation: ‘These immigrants adopt the language of the native American, they wear his clothes and are beginning to take his women, but they seldom adopt his religion or understand his ideals.’ (Brands et al., 646-647).

Given a hostile environment laced with ethnic anxiety, Yezierska sets *Bread Givers* at a time when families such as the Smolinskys were looked down upon, probably giving Settlement Houses more prominence as they “taught” their trainees how to blend in as Americans and thereby avoiding this sense of hostility hurled towards them. The racially charged claims flung at non-Anglo Saxons as previously noted undoubtedly conjured people from southern and eastern Europe in the American collective imagination as individuals with some sort of sub-standard existence. Being classified or looked upon as low on the social rung was not a part of the enthusiastic imaginings that brought these struggling immigrants to America. As such, Yezierksa tells the story of *Bread Givers* through the lens of the Immigrant experience and countering these notions wherein she
emphasizes that there is actually very little difference between the newly arrived immigrants and those long settled in America. As Piper states,

Counternarratives are stories representative of the whole country that are told from the perspective of a country’s minorities. “The concept of the counternarrative falls under the logic of transculturation, yet it differs in that it locates itself within the activity of national identification. According to Homi K. Bhabha, the counternarrative destabilizes the popular representation of the national community, [the] “imagined community,”” by testifying to the fact that images of the collective are as various as the individuals, immigrants among them, who comprise (and describe) it. Thus one could regard the counternarrative as a form of transculturation that operates at the level of the national narrative. That is to say, immigrants bring more than simply cultural material like a new language or religion, to the host country; often, as a result of this heritage, they import entirely new modes of imagining the national community – new ways of conceiving of the relationship between the members of the country at large. By discovering transculturation at the very heart of the act of assimilation, those moments of national belonging in immigrant writing would no longer need to be dismissed as a conciliatory rhetoric necessitated by the historical forces of nativism. Instead they would embody transcultural attempts to rewrite, to counternarrate, the greater sense of what it means to be American. (99, 101 – 102)

Within this framework, when families such as the Smolinskys intersect with members of the “national community,” the notion of “outsiders” is then eliminated, or at the very least, diminished. As such, Sara sets out on her journey of Americanization moving her
closer to that of an “insider” through the process of transculturation. She eventually earns an education, becomes a teacher, marries an American Jewish man within her profession, and eventually, together they care for Sara’s ailing and aging father after the death of Sara’s mother. While it appears to be a happy ending for Sara in that she achieves her goal and marries a man who is appreciative of her career and understanding of her cultural expectations, the autobiographer Bettina Berch questions if the future Sara imagined for herself in America is indeed actually realized. Especially, given that the story for Sara ends with the expectations placed on her from the very beginning – to support her father. Zaborowska’s How We Found America asserts that the endings of the newcomer narratives accommodate gender difference. In the female story, which is the underlying scenario behind such novels as Yezierska’s Bread Givers, a happy ending usually entails an ethnic heroine’s metamorphosis into the New World woman through education and marriage with a native-born or Americanized Jewish man. This clear distinction in the conclusions to male and female acculturation tales lends itself to generalizations – the reader is relieved when a poor immigrant man finally ‘makes it’ in the capitalistic New World and usually rejoices when a marriage concludes a woman’s rites of passage into the new culture-home. (110 – 120)

In this respect, Bread Givers sheds further light as a counternarrative since the “national community” also imagines similar generalizations. Men achieve a level of economic success and women enter the domain of domesticity.

But in caring for her father, Sara is left with the stark realization that when she and Hugo, her husband, prepare to move Rabbi Smolinsky into their new home, she
considers “Hugo’s grip tightened on my arm and we walked on. But I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me” (Yezierska 297). In this sense, Sara’s immigration experience is that of hybridity; her foothold in America is certainly cemented given her Americanization process but she is still somewhat caught in an unresolvable contradiction; her Jewish heritage continues to shadow her. Ultimately for Sara, realizing the American dream that she imagined for herself, is reconciled with an apprehensive reconciliation in that her ethnicity of origin remains tightly woven into her fabric, however stitched a bit looser in America. What appears to be a happy ending for Sara in having achieved her goals, Bettina Berch argues the issues of gender politics raised in \textit{Bread Givers} not only for the fictional Sara Smolinsky, but for Anzia Yezierska as well given the somewhat autobiographical elements in the novel:

Can a woman determine her life for herself, or must she always defer to her father or her husband? Is romantic love a mistake? How can an artist remain creative and still make a living? Are we not all immigrants, in some sense? Where and how can a person find freedom in America? Because all of these questions are still utterly relevant today, Yezierska’s books and stories remain fresh and interesting for the twenty-first century reader. Money, love, and freedom are all just as difficult as ever. At the same time Yezierska was exploring these questions in her writings, she was working through the very same issues in her own life. She [Yezierska] preferred writing ‘autobiographically,’ as if what she was writing had actually happened to her. As a writer, it gave her a way of
knowing that her characters made sense, that they acted as she had (or might have) acted. (18)

Anzia Yezierska, often referred to as the Cinderella of the Tenements or as the “Sweatshop Cinderella” (Berch 15), undoubtedly searched for the answers to the above noted questions through her writings and as Berch indicates. Yezierska may very well have intended that the responses to these questions parallel the immigrant experience. One that is imagined, experiences disruptions from the known, must then be re-imagined as circumstances dictate, and to eventually be reconciled as realistically as possible.

I would argue then that Yezierska may not necessarily have set out to script *Bread Givers* as a “they lived happily ever after” tale but more so in ending the novel with a realistic *balance*. One that moderates between tales of a fabled America with the harsh realities immigrant families such as hers experienced. The final outcome in having achieved some level of success, in spite of disillusionments, situates the immigrant that much closer as an integral member of the American national community. In this regard, *Bread Givers* is a tale of acculturation.
CHAPTER 2

Christ in Concrete

Pietro Di Donato’s immigrant novel, Christ in Concrete, tells the tale of an Italian family’s experiences in America during the 1920s and into the Depression. As with Bread Givers, the timing of Christ in Concrete coincides with Di Donato’s childhood. Published in 1939, the author tells the story in a somewhat reverse fairy-tale setting. Instead of ending with America’s storied promises of prosperity and golden opportunities fulfilled for poor immigrants, such legends are buried far into the story with cheers of “Go to the America! Go the America!” (Di Donato 188). However, the merriment and enthusiasm in leaving the familiar behind in exchange for a better life are quickly doused when one of the novel’s characters responds with: “Here am I. And so what?” (188). Christ in Concrete bookends this fleeting account of hope and disillusionment with the story of Paul, the novel’s main character, and his family. After migrating to America from Italy, they settle in New York City’s Lower East Side section much like the Smolinskys of Bread Givers and right around the same time period. This broadens the scope of the Lower East Side’s diverse, poor immigrant population at the time. Yet contrary to the meaningful words of welcome etched into the Statute of Liberty—“Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”—the Orthodox Jews and the Italian immigrants were not necessarily well received as newcomers. Instead, as indicated in the textbook, Strangers to These Shores, “Although the immigrant groups segregated themselves socially from one another, outsiders saw them mainly as unacculturated strangers and tended to lump them together. Italians and Jews stood out from others, though, because of their large numbers, residential clustering, religions,
languages, appearance, and cultural practices” (Parrillo 127). Of note, there is no surname provided throughout the entire novel for Paul’s family as though their awareness of living in America is indeed deemed as a “strange” rupture from their sense of identity.

Regardless, Paul’s father Geremio gains employment in the construction industry in New York City and envisions for his sons “that they someday will be American builders. And then I’ll help them to put the gold away in the basement” (Di Donato 4). Geremio’s dream is to literally build a foundation for his family in America and one that is strongly supported by wealth. After steadily working a grueling six day work-week, Geremio is not only able to provide for his wife, six children, and another child on the way, but he is finally able to fulfill the beginnings of the American Dream – the financial means to purchase his own home in America. The narrator exuberantly tells of Geremio’s accomplishments: “He bought a house! Twenty years he had helped to mold the New World. And now he was to have a house of his own! What mattered that it was no more than a wooden shack? It was his own!”(6). William Boelhower’s article in the Reader, “The Invention of Ethnicity,” argues that becoming a property owner in America is not necessarily a sign of upward mobility, and especially when the particular piece of property does not alter the immigrant’s lower socio-economic status. But rather, the concept of the American Dream is confused with the idea of “home” as simply relocated and situated in the New World where the fabled “milk and honey flow free in the streets.” In this instance, Boelhower describes Geremio’s quest to own a home in America as that of “a history-making act. The topographical movement from one country to another, that is, the motif of the journey, suggests that the dominant conception of space is that of a homogeneous (because as yet undiscovered) ideal habitat. The utopian and fantastic
impulse of the immigrants and their clarity of vision also create this type of spatial model” (Sollors 164-65). Interestingly, and in contrast with *Bread Givers*, the “history-making act” for Rabbi Smolinsky as a struggling immigrant is not in owning a home in America but rather in the imagination of a “spatial model” where his books and his teachings bring America to him. As he states to Mrs. Smolinsky, “you’ll see yet how all America will come to my feet to learn” (Yezierska 9).

Furthermore, expanding upon Boelhower’s “utopian and fantastic impulse,” what seems to charm the characters in both *Bread Givers* and in *Christ in Concrete*, is the belief or fantasy that migrating to America will magically transform their socio-economic status from poor to well-off upon arrival in the New World. What may appear as a “clarity of vision” as Boelhower states, I would argue is a state of delusion. The grand tales of prosperity in America heard back in the Old World ignored accounts of poverty in America and the social growing pains typically experienced in order to at least achieve a middle class status. Achieving economic improvement for these poor immigrants would realistically take at least a generation (if not more) as reflected in the time that it took Paul’s father to work and save up enough money to buy nothing more than a ramshackle piece of property – twenty years.

Despite this, Geremio’s entire family is excited about owning a home but Old World superstitions keep them from sharing the good news with friends and neighbors. They fear being cursed with the “evil eye” out of jealousy for their good fortune. Yet just a few days shy of finalizing the purchase of their home, Geremio leaves for work on a Good Friday only to suffer an untimely death in a grisly construction accident. The accident itself could have been avoided had Geremio’s safety violation warnings to the
construction company’s owner been heeded. Instead, Geremio is ignored since the owner is blinded by profit and driven to cutting corners as much as possible. Without the structure’s proper support, the building eventually gives way with beams of steel slicing through the open floors and not sparing anything, or anyone, in its way, Geremio included. As the building collapses, Geremio’s body “catapulted insanely in its directionless flight, and shot down neatly and deliberately between the empty wooden forms of a foundation wall pilaster in upright position, his blue swollen face pressed against the form and his arms outstretched, caught securely through the meat by the thin round bars of reinforcing steel” (Di Donato 13). A concrete hopper positioned above Geremio’s crucified-like body spills onto him and seals him in cement. It is in this critical passage that the title of the novel becomes symbolic. All of the workers on the construction site killed were Italian immigrants of little to no means who were exploited for profit and without regard to their safety. They died in the name of greed for the sake of someone else’s prosperity. What was once the means for Geremio’s dream for his sons, turns into a living nightmare for his family with his death.

Geremio’s family is then faced with the unexpected crisis in not only mourning his death, but also with facing the financial burden of providing for themselves without Geremio’s income. Let alone, can they barely afford the only piece of land for the family’s patriarch - his grave. At his funeral, Geremio is mourned by friends and family with memories of the Old World. His brother, Luigi, resigns himself to the loss of Geremio and any talk of the past with: “You speak of the old world. This is another world” (30). Luigi’s acceptance of loss is somewhat surreal in the sense that he acknowledges that the world of America has entirely erased his brother’s existence, yet in
recalling the Old World, Geremio still exists there in some symbolic way. Josephine Gattuso Hendin states that these types of dialogues in immigrant novels serve as an “allegory [for] Italian American diasporic narratives as an interaction between Old World and New as well as a reconciliatory of the upheavals of mass migration. The diasporic narrative mediates relationships between Old World and New as well as the fluctuating fortunes of Italian Americans” (152). Grieving for Geremio is then extended to metaphorically mourning for the Old World. Luigi continues recalling the Old World as though time and space escaped the disruption of migration: “It was yesterday in Abruzzi when he and his wife met at the feast of Saint Mary” (32). Annunziata, Geremio’s widow, is nevertheless encouraged to forge ahead with the words “one door [closes] and opens another” (32). Their son Paul, at the tender age of twelve, is then left asking his mother “is not all this a wrong story?” (32). Christ in Concrete then reveals itself as a story of imagined dreams and hopes in the New World that come crashing down as harsh realities when poor immigrants face poverty and exploitation, as was the case for Geremio’s family. Further complicating their lives would be that of Old World norms and traditions that inform their culture. This serves to burden Paul’s role in his family as the oldest male child and son of a widow in that tradition demands that he take on the task of financial provider for his family.

This new set of circumstances creates a “wrong story” for Paul in that he must abandon school in order to provide for his family. But, as he matures and yearns to return to school, then the notion of reconciling Old World customs with New World norms creates conflict between Paul and his mother. The cultural expectations placed on Paul do not provide the space for him to seek individualism. Similarly, this is the case
for Sara Smolinsky in *Bread Givers*. The major difference however, is that Sara’s father expects to be provided for in the New World by his wife and daughters. For Annunziata, the expectation was that her husband would provide for his family. Unfortunately, Geremio’s death leaves his family hungry and destitute, and in an act of desperation, Annunziata attempts suicide (but is saved by Paul). Facing the reality that Paul working is her family’s only salvation, she reluctantly allows him to seek work while cautioning “Paul my Paul, be careful... be careful for mother yours” (63). With her twelve year old seeking work while they are on the brink of homelessness, any fantasies of streets paved with gold in America quickly evaporate. The elements of death, extreme anxiety in facing hunger, and a child having to provide for his entire family consisting of eight members, begs the question - was it worth it to sail to the New World? A response can be found in Bharati Mukherjee’s article “Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature.” Although Mukherjee writes of the immigrant experience during the second half of the twentieth century, her analysis echoes similar upheavals experienced by earlier immigrants. She states that

for immigrants who fled to the US to escape or to protest oppressive regimes in their homelands, immigration is loss of community, of language, and of extended family. It is to give up on the dream of a better future in one’s home country. It is to cut oneself off from history and to condemn oneself to a world of ghosts and memories. It is to admit that having survived terror and poverty means nothing. It is to submit to a present in which past nightmares are continually relived. (689)

This resonates with the position presented earlier that the idea of “home” is simply relocated. What remains rooted for Annunziata are the elements of tradition, culture, and
familial support which serve them to forge ahead in the New World regardless of where their nightmares take place.

As Paul’s widowed mother reflects on the loss of her husband and her young son engaging in work unfit for a child (which almost kills him as well), she also recalls or imagines “home,” questions the concept of the American Dream, and contrasts her expectations of an improved life in America with the harsh reality of her hardscrabble existence and circumstances. In Annunziata being removed from her familiar world, Stefania Lucamante points to the immigrant woman as one who: “deems as negative everything indicating a breach between families; she expresses the horror of abrupt separations. How could emigration be perceived otherwise? Desolation and seclusion were the most common and appropriate ways of life for the women” (303). An extended form of an abrupt separation in *Christ in Concrete* falls upon Luigi, Geremio’s brother. His initial reaction after Geremio’s death is to take care of his brother’s family by moving in with them and helping support them financially. As the older brother of a traditional Italian family, this would be expected. Yet another crisis befalls them when Luigi himself suffers an accident at work wherein he loses his leg and is hospitalized for a lengthy time. This renders Luigi unable to help Annunziata and her children. She is further “secluded” from family during dire circumstances and is left with no choice but to turn to her oldest child for financial support.

Within the context of cultural expectations, *Christ in Concrete* parallels much of the hardships found in *Bread Givers*. Paul, as the eldest child and male, must seek work as the family’s bread-winner even though he himself is only a child. Like Sara Smolinsky of *Bread Givers*, Paul eventually finds work and is also exploited by greedy
bosses in that he is repeatedly cheated out of an honest day’s work. After gaining employment as a brick-layer, Paul is promised a salary of four to five dollars a day. He dreams of “how sweet would be the bread his flesh had earned, how mother and children would glorify with their appetites the good meat and fruit, how dear would be the weekend rest” (82). However, he is instead paid five dollars for the entire week’s worth of work. The company allows him to work even though he is underage yet exploits him because he is underage thereby denying him the same privileges afforded to the adult workers while reaping the benefits of Paul’s work. His persistence for justice in not having been paid his rightful earnings is ignored. Reluctantly, Paul must tell his mother that he was cheated out of a week’s pay and explains to her “when I asked him why they did not help me when they knew we deserved it he said: ‘That’s the way the world is’” (Di Donato 92-93). Again, a sense of Old World and New World being nothing more than a spatial difference rather than distinct places of hopelessness versus prosperity, disrupts any tales of riches in America. And similarly to the Smolinskys, Paul’s family confronts the many hurdles in place for immigrants as noted in the Introduction; that of language barriers, the struggle to maintain or shed old world traditions, restrictive religious practices, ethnic customs deemed as strange to the dominant White Anglo Saxons of the time, and the assuming of a new identity in America.

Paul’s sense of obligation in assuming the role of man of the house as the son of Italian immigrants, in providing for his family in his father’s absence, and in yielding to his mother’s strong belief in God and Christ to guide their everyday lives, is referred to as “Cultural Catholicism” and as Peter Kvidera points out in his article:
While the novel’s form is steeped in Christian ritual, its characters also act out Catholic sacramentalism in their daily lives. Some remain devotedly reverent in their religious practice, but others demonstrate their faith in response to the harshness of American life and labor. Through such ritual, in fact, di Donato’s characters act out a cultural identity that combats destabilizing forces that often render them impotent and inarticulate in America. Catholicism emerges not only as cultural articulation, but also as a performance by which they simultaneously retain tradition and create new standards for coping with tragedy and disappointment. (157)

Paul’s belief in Catholicism is at the root of his resolve in seeking work to support his struggling family. He cannot bear to see his mother skip meals in order to feed her children and thinks to himself “I cannot sit here. I must find those whom God has chosen to feed us... for the Lord will take these two onions and four potatoes and break them into portions to last until my arms are strong for work” (Di Donato 51). The Catholic Church would then be seen as a sanctuary of hope as an extension of Italian culture in order to help families struggling through periods of a crisis inasmuch as the Settlement Houses found in Bread Givers provided social services to its needy residents. Yet when Paul seeks assistance from the local Church to help feed his hungry family, he is dismissed by the priest—while the priest enjoys a dinner of abundance—by providing Paul a portion of a cake to take home for his family of eight. As a hungry child himself, Paul is dazzled by the foods in front of the priest that could only be made available to him through tithings from the Church’s parishioners. In this instance, the priest and Rabbi Smolinsky act out their narcissistic traits in that America will come “to their feet” rather
than they as clergy, acting as charitable members of society. This further cements the novel’s proletarian stance that religious establishments do not necessarily concern themselves with the economic hardships of its members. They instead work against the common people when denying them aid in a time of crisis yet the religious institutions are supported by these people in need.

Interestingly, Annunziata and Paul step outside the lines of traditional Roman Catholicism and seek the help of a mystic known as the Cripple. She clearly operates as a scam but unlike the Church—a recognized and legitimate institution of society—the Cripple offers more comfort with her words from the “spiritual world” than the Church provides to Geremio’s surviving family. They seek the help of the psychic as a means to communicate with Geremio and to ask if he is okay. As the Cripple performs her trance in order to get in touch with the “spirit world,” she offers the following to Annunziata and Paul:

He has his arms out to you and is pleadin’ for you to put your mind at rest, for when his time came, he says, he knew he had to go and that God needed him. When the accident happened, he told God he was ready, and just asked Him to take care of his family, and then he went to his Maker just like that! No, sonny, he shakes his head and says there wasn’t a stitch of pain, and that he went to his Lord God with a clean soul and a smile. [Then,] the weight of the world lifted itself from Paul. Tears dropped soothingly from his eyes” (Di Donato 110-11). The comforting words provided by the Cripple sustain Annunziata and Paul far more than the meager portion of cake offered by the Priest. The Cripple works her magic to
energize Paul in forging ahead to provide for his family. As such, Annunziata and Paul feel blessed for visiting the Cripple.

Indeed, Paul secures a job, or Job, as is often referenced in the novel. Again, the aspect of collapsing culture with religion is “confused” with the space considered as home and its obligations. Paul provides not only financial support but emotional support to his mother as well. His experiences provide him with the maturity to understand the comfort provided in combining culture and faith in search of hope and as part of his ethnicity. In this respect, patriarchal norms work to burden Paul and restrict him from seeking his own sense of individualism in America. Unlike Rabbi Smolinsky, he is not tended to by the women in his family, rather he is the one and only provider. And as a day laborer, he cannot attend school as would be the case for the more established children of New York City during this time period. He is instead perceived as a poor, Italian immigrant given his appearance as a child laborer who literally carries, or wears, the tools typical of his trade. In this sense, Italian culture is at the center of Paul’s faith whereas for the Smolinsky family in Bread Givers, religion is at the center of their culture. Regardless, religion and cultural norms are collapsed together and as such, perpetuate Old World norms.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Paul’s job in Christ in Concrete is interchangeably referenced as Job as though work, family obligations, and Biblical scripture are collapsed into one entity. Borrowing from the Book of Job and connecting its meaning to Paul’s story, further emphasizes the sense of Cultural Catholicism:

The Book of Job is a mixture of divine and human wisdom that addresses a major life issue: Why do righteous people suffer undeservedly? The Book of Job is
also a prime example of Hebrew wisdom literature that labors with the concept of theodicy, which is a defense of the integrity of the justice and righteousness of God in light of the evil, injustice, and undeserved suffering in the world. Some writers have suggested that theodicy is the theme of the Book of Job. If this is so, then the emphasis of the book is not totally on the man Job and his suffering, though he and his suffering are certainly central, but also on God Himself and His relationship to His supreme creation. Job therefore is a book dealing with human suffering. (Waters 436-37)

The significance of collapsing religion and culture also plays a meaningful role in this novel given that Paul’s father was killed on a Good Friday further emphasizing the aspect of suffering. But as is also the case in Bread Givers, religion serves as one of the major cultural identities for Paul’s family and with helping them cope in the New World by adhering to their respective faiths.

However, religion impedes their economic advancement as the local Priest, a clergyman privileged with authority by society, assumes the right to deny Paul’s request for goodwill just as Rabbi Smolinky refuses to help his own family earn money. In this instance, a comparison can be made between Sara’s father not providing for his family given his religious obligations and the Priest’s refusal to help despite the fact he is supported by parishioners such as Paul’s family. With this, Paul must continue laboring at a time when business owners ignored Child Labor Laws or were pressured to ignore them by families who needed children to work. And of course, hiring children at cheaper wages than adults would provide greater profits for business owners. But like Sara Smolinsky, Paul eventually attends evening school in order to try and advance his socio-
economic status in America and to integrate his cultural world with the one beyond the Lower East Side. Rose Basile Green details the significance of social integration for Italian immigrants in America: “the economic struggle was only one phase of their assimilation, a distinction that is of primary concern here. Of equal importance was their social acceptance, which was integrally involved with their improvement in education and in their eventual emergence into the cultural life of America. Education, therefore, was a primary factor in assimilation” (47). Nevertheless, striving for an education in America creates conflict between Paul and his mother as she fears that her son is becoming less of an Italian, or less observant as a Catholic, and more Americanized. As Hendin emphasizes: “Conflicts between marginal and mainstream culture, tradition-bound parents and their more assimilated children, and among ethnic groups have made tropes of distance and competitive rage commonplace” (141). The word “tropes” is operative here since it furthers the understanding of Catholicism shadowing the narrative in *Christ in Concrete*. Conflicts are also witnessed in the novel between Paul and his mother as he increasingly becomes more of a cynic than a believer due to feeling used as a son, a financial provider, and benefactor of others at the expense of his own sense of individualism. The more Paul moves towards the process of Americanization, the more Annunziata suffers a loss of Cultural Catholicism.

The suffering of Paul and his family is exacerbated by bureaucracy when they try to financially remedy Geremio’s wrongful death. Annunziata attends the hearing for the building’s accident at the Compensation Bureau in order to seek compensation for the negligence that ultimately kills Geremio and by extension, for the loss of his wages. The Compensation Bureau itself is described as an intimidating government building that
mimics Geremio’s final resting place. As the narrator describes, “it had the discouraging semblance and overwhelming morgue aspect of Institution” (Di Donato 122).

Annunziata is unsuccessful in arguing her case since she is no match for the more established Mr. Murden (the owner of the construction company), Mr. Kagan (the representative of the insurance company) and Referee Parker (the arbiter of the case). Of note, all of these men in positions of authority are known by their surnames, unlike Paul and his family. The lack of a surname further emphasizes the sense of their “strangeness” and furthermore, a lack of rightful belonging. Annunziata is no match for the experienced government and corporate owners. Not only does she lose the case, but she must listen as the owner of the construction company speaks ill of the men killed in the accident, including Geremio: “Your Honor, I speak from experience. The Eyetalians are good workers, when you watch them and take care of them like a wet nurse. But when not personally supervised they get themselves into all kinds of trouble. They’re careless like children” (126). Referring to “Eyetalians” as though they are an inferior people rings of Nativism much like mentioned in Bread Givers. Insulted and disillusioned as Annunziata and her children witness victory on the faces of Mr. Murden, Mr. Kagan, and Referee Parker, the narrator says:

And they saw the winning smiles that made them feel they had conspired with Geremio to kill himself so that they could present themselves there as objects of pity and then receive American dollars for nothing. The smiles that made them feel they had undressed in front of these gentlemen and revealed dirty underwear. The smiles that smelled of refreshing toothpaste and considered flesh. The smiles
that made them feel they were un-Godly and greasy pagan Christians; the smiles
that told them they did not belong in the Workmen’s Compensation Bureau. (127)

Undoubtedly, Annunziata and her children are made to feel as “outsiders” in the
Workmen’s Compensation Bureau. I would argue that this sense of not belonging,
underscores why the narrator denies Geremio’s family a surname -- their stake in the
United States as immigrants is at best on shaky ground. Similarly, this is the same type
of circumstance that killed Geremio and by extension, their dreams.

Paul, like his father, gains steady employment as a construction worker and as he
matures, he is seen more and more as an adult by Nazone, his godfather. As the year
1929 approaches and the country is suffering a Depression, Nazone finds himself without
work and pleads to Paul to help him find a job:

   Godson, I implore you; you must help me get work – work that I may go to my
wife and children in Abruzzi. The career of builder in this land is done. This land
has become a soil that has contradicted itself, a country of Babel where Christians
are beginning to wander about in hungry distress cursing each other in strange
tongues, ripping their hearts, and possessing no longer even fingernails with
which to scratch their desperation. But oh, that I may leave this land of
disillusion! (203)

Paul fulfills his duty as godson and is able to secure a job for Nazone where he himself
works only to once again experience a grisly construction accident. This time, it is
Nazone that falls to his death after the foreman of the construction company, Mr. Jones,
is angry at Paul and Nazone for arriving late at work:
Paul saw foreman Jones’ mad foot catch the tub and throw him into his godfather, pitching Nazone violently from the scaffold trowel in hand. He fell to the sill of a wide window, hit it with his stomach and bounced out into the open. Paul looked over the scaffold rail and through staring mouth and eyes sent out his soul to catch his godfather who flung out his arms and rested on the speed of space that sucked him down. For an electrical instant their eyes met. Oh Jesus, the misery he poured up! A flame shot through him. ‘That is your father Geremio!’ it cried, ‘Your father! You!’ Paul bit his hands. He held out his hands and gazed at them. That was he. Those were the limbs that stretched their life force against brick. This was the world, that spun and sickened, making him sit on a doorstep, making him want to clash the earth and shout for it to stop, the world that would crumple him like his father and Nazone! (208-210)

The disillusionment felt by Nazone is then transferred onto Paul as he struggles with his life and job in the New World destined as sufferings found in the Book of Job. It is indeed the wrong story for Paul. Lastly, Paul must deal with the death of his mother and in continuing to take care of his siblings. Much like the ending in Bread Givers, there is a stark resemblance in how Christ in Concrete ends. Paul, in sacrificing a part of the Americanization process for himself, also feels the weight of his ancestors as does Sara.

The anxieties raised for Italian immigrant men and boys during the novel’s time period were in part due to Old World cultural pressures pitted against an American sensibility towards individualization. Paul, although too young to make adult choices, nevertheless casts his lot with traditions familiar to him. To have done otherwise would have ostracized him not only from his family, but that of the entire Italian immigrant
community. This notion is reinforced in Rocco Marinaccio’s article, “Tea and Cookies. Diavolo!”: Italian American Masculinity in John Fante’s ‘Wait until Spring, Bandini’” as follows: “To adopt the American values of independent ambition and professional achievement in place of the traditional Italian emphasis on personal sacrifice and family loyalty, requires a hard-knuckled individualism alien to traditional Italian values” (Marinaccio 44). Through this lens, it is quite possible that had Paul’s (Di Donato’s) father died during Paul’s adulthood, that he would still have stepped in to care for his mother and siblings. The location of Pietro Di Donato’s personal experiences and as reflected in *Christ in Concrete* can be found in the construction accident describing Nazone’s fall to his death, as was the case for Di Donato’s father.

As noted earlier, *Christ in Concrete* is widely considered a semi-autobiographical work given that Di Donato scripts much of his personal life into the novel. Biographer Matthew Diomede notes: “At twelve, Paul, like Pietro, lost his father when his father, a construction worker, fell from a work scaffold. Paul, like Pietro, assumed the role of father in raising and supporting his mother and seven sisters. These autobiographical elements recount the journeys of other people, especially those of Paul’s mother and father, which are central to an understanding of Paul’s journey” (17).

Similarly, Anzia Yezierska mirrors her own life through that of Sara Smolinsky’s character in *Bread Givers*. Both women migrated from Eastern Europe, grew up under the influence of a domineering father devoted to Orthodox Judaism, struggled with redefining womanhood in a land that as mentioned earlier, encouraged individualism, and each strongly advocated for their sense of self. In pursuing her own independence, Sara Smolinsky defies her father, her cultural norms, and her mother’s wishes to marry young
by literally walking out on her family in order to live in a manner that allowed her to support herself and further her education by attending night school. Despite her mother’s pleas to return home and follow customary Orthodox Jewish traditions for women, Sara Smolinsky continues on her path until she has successfully completed her studies and becomes a teacher. She does not however completely turn her back on her family in their time of need after her mother passes away. Instead ironically, it is Sara who takes care of her father in his twilight years.

Bharati Mukherjee states that “the ‘Literature of New Arrival’ simultaneously expresses the necessity for escape from the repressive institutions and the poverty that life in the homeland entails and the anguish of separation from family and homeland. To survive in life is to endure the pain and inevitability of ‘unhousement’” (695). Part of this survival for destitute immigrants, requires reconciling the contradictions between imagined fairy tale settings in the New World with the harsh realities upon arrival. The disruptions created as a result of migrating to America under such circumstances, can then be either accepted as worthwhile in having come to the New World or in resigning oneself that for future generations, eventually, there is hope in achieving the American Dream.
CONCLUSION

Indeed, *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* reflect the reconciling of dreams of prosperity with disillusionments for poor immigrants in America during the late nineteenth century and into the earlier part of the twentieth century. Issues such as disparities among the social classes, intolerance of differing ethnicities, exploitation of newcomers, and Nativism worked in concert to further oppress immigrants in search of a better life in a land that supposedly welcomed the “poor, huddled masses.” While the stories of Sara and Paul begin with similar struggles, their comparisons end with quite different outcomes. Sara of *Bread Givers* achieves a sense of American individualism as she strives for independence and in reaching her goals. She is not entirely freed from her culture of origin but manages to transition into the larger national community through her acculturation. Unlike for Paul, his set of circumstances and cultural expectations cement him as a poor, working immigrant from beginning to end. He does indeed progress from that of apprentice to a skilled worker yet is unable to significantly break away from his sense of Cultural Catholicism and obligations to his family. This denies him the pursuit of individualism as an American. Yet as counternarratives, *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* ultimately reflect the stories of the American “imagined” community at large given that it is indeed the land of immigrants. By extension, these novels are representative of variations on the themes of so many American lives.

However, as poor immigrants who came to America during the period of the Great Migration, they were viewed as “strange.” Especially, since they numbered in the millions which made them highly visible. In essence, this made it possible to scapegoat...
them as the perpetrators of disease and poverty rather than members of society criticizing a system such as capitalism that not only provides both benefits and hardships to all of its recipients, but a system that can (and does) work to exploit members of society of marginal economic means. This sort of blindness to reality created a collision course between immigrants navigating their way around a new society and with the mainstream Americans who had already arrived. Given current anxieties with immigrant populations arriving in America today who are also deemed as Others, framing an understanding that different ethnicities will indeed intersect with established norms, and undoubtedly clash, lends relevance to understanding current conflicts towards immigration reform.

Fictional novels such as *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* offer the types of narratives necessary for gaining an understanding of conflicts created by such a migration experience and that help bridge an understanding in our continued anxieties towards immigrants. Richard Schaefer notes in his book *Race and Ethnicity in the United States*, that America today is a “nation likened to a kaleidoscope because the diverse population has not fused into a melting pot, nor is the future composition apt to be as static as a salad bowl. We [then] consider whether our face-to-face interaction takes advantage of our diverse society or whether we interpret our social surroundings to conform to more intolerant views of one another” (196). This statement is as true for yesterday’s immigration experience as it is for today. Perpetuating a sense of conformity or even xenophobia would inarguably be un-American given that America is the land of immigrants wherein the traditions, celebrations, foods, etc. of other nations have folded into our own everyday “world.”
Furthermore, in bringing the voices of the immigrants to the center of this type of understanding—that of the authors of immigrant fiction works—the reader is then provided with a realistic understanding of the struggles encountered. It is then that migration can be analyzed through a meaningful, critical lens.

In essence, *Bread Givers* and *Christ in Concrete* each reflect the contradictions that immigrants experienced between the enthusiastic fantasies in coming to America and the harsh realities they faced upon arrival as poor immigrants during the earlier part of the twentieth century. Di Donato’s biographer Matthew Diomede argues that *Christ in Concrete* reflects:

- a novel primarily of socioeconomic or political protest as well as a protest of oppression of any kind.
- Second, it is a novel about love that comes from the human heart.
- Third, it fulfills a vital function in developing the corpus of Di Donato’s work, especially in providing the foundation for tracing the development of Paul, or Paulo. In its most general sense, *Christ in Concrete* is a novel depicting the coldness of the world and how it affects an Italian-American family and community, though its universal application is also obvious. (71)

Given its universal application, I would argue that the same elements of socioeconomic protest, finding love, providing the immigrant author a specific type of narrative, and expressing the harshness of realities in migrating to America, are the same principles that also apply to *Bread Givers*. And undoubtedly, they apply to future counternarratives of the immigrant experience which would eventually fold into the American “national community.”
Works Cited


Mukherjee, Bharati. "Immigrant Writing: Changing the Contours of a National Literature."
Parrillo, Vincent N. Strangers to These Shores: Race and Ethnic Relations in the United States.
Piper, Kevin. "The Making of an American: Counternarration in Louis Adamic's Laughing in the
Jungle and Anzia Yezierska's Bread Givers." Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S. 35.1
"Railroads in the Late 19th Century - For Teachers (Library of Congress)." Railroads in the Late
Print.
2012. <REFLECTIONS ON SUFFERING>.
Zaborowska, Magdalena J. How We Found America: Reading Gender through East-European