

A moribund italianità.

Joey Skee (December 11, 2012)



Some thoughts on presepi, creativity, and death.

My 2012 Christmas presepio is plagued by zombies. God's Incarnation is vexed by the living dead. You could call this year's theme "[The Walking Pastori](#) [2]."

Some Christians might believe the co-mingling of the Nativity story and the prevalent horror narrative [troublesome, perhaps even sacrilegious](#) [3], but for me it is a personal engagement with a transnational Italian culture.



For thirteen years, I have been assembling a presepio in my Brooklyn apartment kitchen. While the presepio was part of my childhood, I was inspired to create my own miniature tableaux by the Italian-American folk artists in New York City that [I researched](#) [4] and wrote about over the course of twenty-five years.

Chris DeVito, John Miniero, [Antonio Vigilante](#) [5], and many others have taught me that the artistry of the vernacular presepio is not in the crafting of the individual figures but in the creation of a Lilliputian landscape that the individual artist designs and executes.

(Some Italian Americans would rather celebrate the “handcrafted work of art . . . created by master artisans of the Campania Region” than recognize homegrown Italian-American presepi with their chipped, out of scale, and anachronistic statuettes.) The figurines can be made of fired ceramic or molded resin, they can depict shepherds or Disney characters, or they can be newly minted or chipped heirlooms. Ultimately, it is the topography that counts.

I have also been motivated by the Neapolitan artisans who make politically-themed figurines in keeping with current affairs, be it Obama’s 2012 re-election or Berlusconi’s sex scandals. I have been also mindful of Italian presepi that address social issues such as [marriage equality](#) [6] or [immigration reform](#) [7]. Building on this rich, diasporic tradition, I have created presepi with ever-changing themes from “[Baghdad](#) [8]” (2007) to “[The South Bronx, circa 1975](#) [9]” (2008).

Camping (2010)

Roman Ruins (2005)

Surrealism (2004)

I thought of the zombie-themed presepio after a lively conversation between my son Lucca and Paolo Martinelli, a friend visiting from Rome.

Paolo Martinelli’s “Natale in casa Freud” presepio, 2009.

Perhaps I had run out of ideas and had finally jumped the shark with this annual enterprise but I needed something simple to make. Last year, I worked until December 24th to complete three “Watts Towers” for my table-top tableau.

Now that it is finished, I find myself late at night staring at the miniature scene, mesmerized not by my handiwork but by [the connected narrative](#) [10] I attempted to stage. It is at these moments that the intertextual aspect of the presepio reveals itself, as my mind makes connections not originally planned or even obvious at first blush.

The cemetery—its tombstones inscribed with names like [Margaret Fuller Slack](#) [11] and [Frank Drummer](#) [12] from [Spoon River Anthology](#) [13]—prompts me to focus on death’s reaching grip and those who have [passed due to illness](#) [14], natural disaster, and war, as well as those who escaped, this time, the final grasp.

I also find myself thinking of those Italian-American zombies, who enact their own “[twilight of ethnicity](#) [15]” through their moribund italianità. The waxing nostalgically about the “old neighborhood” and nonna slaving over Christmas Eve dinner takes a particularly macabre turn when “professional ethnics” who, speaking on our behalf with a seeming lack of reflectivity, keen incessantly about what they lost. They are the walking dead who clutch at their own fading sense of Italianness.



Remembering the past and honoring the dead should not be saturnine and useless acts, but instead a creative refashioning of self and community. Recent works by Italian Americans—memoirs like Joanna Clapps Herman’s [The Anarchist Bastard](#) [16] and Annie Lanzillotto’s [L is for Lion](#) [17], revisionist histories like Jennifer Guglielmo’s [Living the Revolution](#) [18] and Marcella Bencivenni’s [Italian Immigrant Radical Culture](#) [19], and art installations like B. Amore’s “[Lifeline—filo della vita](#) [20]”—allow us to rediscover and reclaim the past as creative projects. I see myself and my humble presepio as being actively involved in this ongoing creation of Italian-American culture.

St. Joseph and Mary fend off approaching zombies.

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http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=4777 [4]

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Links

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- [2] <http://youtu.be/UnFOXUL6u98>
- [3] <http://www.colbertnation.com/the-colbert-report-videos/400779/october-26-2011/war-on-halloween---costume-swapping---jesus-ween>
- [4] http://www.loc.gov/today/cyberlc/feature_wdesc.php?rec=4777
- [5] <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/14/nyregion/14nativity.html>
- [6] <http://www.repubblica.it/2006/12/sezioni/politica/camera-presepe-gay/camera-presepe-gay/camera-presepe-gay.html>
- [7] <http://www.agrigentooggi.it/i-re-magi-nel-presepe-della-cattedrale-non-arriveranno/>
- [8] <http://aesthetic.gregcookland.com/2008/03/experiencing-war-in-iraq.html>
- [9] <http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/12/17/away-in-a-manger-in-the-south-bronx/>
- [10] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4IR4eNIH5o>
- [11] http://spoonriveranthology.net/spoon/river/view/Margaret_Fuller_Slack
- [12] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pG9YzSxLqG0>
- [13] <http://spoonriveranthology.net/spoon/river/>
- [14] <http://www.journalstandard.com/obituaries/x2067831404/Obituary-Paul-S-Giaimo>
- [15] <http://www.amazon.com/Italian-Americans-Twilight-Ethnicity-Prentice-Hall/dp/013506676X>
- [16] <http://www.joannaclappsherman.com/anarchist.html>
- [17] <http://www.annielanzillotto.com/>
- [18] <http://uncpressblog.com/2012/03/26/excerpt-living-the-revolution-by-jennifer-guglielmo/>
- [19] <http://nyupress.org/books/book-details.aspx?bookId=1808>
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