

Notes and Documents

Vita Brevis: An Appreciation of the Life and Work of Paul Giaimo (May 8, 1962–June 8, 2012)

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When I was young, I used to think that death was something that happened to old people. When my family would bring us into the rooms of dying relatives—the ones we watched, touched, and gave last kisses to—they were always very old with gray or white hair, wrinkled skin, and thin hands stretching out fingers that could barely squeeze ours.

Now I am a survivor of the deaths of many others. Grieving the death of someone you know and love is difficult, but more difficult still is when the person who dies is younger than you. This is what I face in the death of Paul Sebastian Giaimo. I can accept Paul's death at age 50, and have, but I can also wonder just how much more he could have given the world had his life continued even a few more years. Paul was a committed scholar and colleague, and though his energy and ideas will be missed by all of us, his works and actions will live on through the art of his academic writings and through the memories that those who met him continue to carry with them.

I first met Paul at one of the American Italian Historical Association's conferences in Chicago, just after he had landed his first job. He was filled with such enthusiasm and creativity that I knew his work would eventually have a strong impact on the field, and it did. Paul's insights into the relationship between Italian American studies and the larger field of American studies were cutting-edge and transformative. His 2003 *MELUS* essay "Ethnic Outsiders: The Hyper-Ethnicized Narrator in Langston Hughes and Fred L. Gardaphé" was a great example of how his mastery of American studies helped to expand the audience for Italian-American subjects. I will always be appreciative of this.

Reading his obituary made me realize that the people we meet in academic contexts, even those we go on to call colleagues and friends, offer only a small part of who they really are at the annual venues when we gather to exchange ideas. We are all so much more than the arguments we present, than the social behavior we exhibit when we are away from home, than the knowledge we reveal through talks and after-session conversations in restaurants, bars, and hotel lobbies. While I knew that Paul was close to

the Catholic Church (you can read that in some of his articles and especially in his study of Don DeLillo), I was unaware that he was a member of such organizations as the Catholic Worker and the Knights of Columbus.

The last time I saw Paul was at the March 22, 2012, presentation he made at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute on his new book, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work*. The energy with which he presented his ideas and the force of his rhetoric masked the fight against cancer that his body was waging. He cut a fine figure that night as he took people through some of the main points of his past work and revealed to us the direction he would be taking going forward. You could not tell from his physical presence during the lecture that he was dying, for he projected so much energy that it couldn't help but enter the audience. It was as though his intellectual life had taken over his physical life, pushing it to extremes that his body was incapable of maintaining. In that presentation he sketched out the scope of his study and carefully built arguments for the value of reading DeLillo as no other critic had done before. Paul challenged the typical ways of viewing DeLillo as a postmodern writer and made strong arguments by including the Italian-American and Catholic signs in his novels. Paul's book is mandatory reading for anyone working on DeLillo and will no doubt affect future DeLillo scholarship. At the end of his talk Paul revealed an elaborate and ambitious plan for his future work.

After the presentation I suggested we walk back to his hotel and grab a drink, as we often did after the conference presentations he made earlier in his life. He looked at me very seriously and said that he just couldn't do it and asked if we could take a taxi. We did, and when we arrived at his hotel he excused himself from the drink, saying that he had to recoup his energy for meeting his family the next day. He left me with an incredibly strong hug, stronger than he usually gave, and one that must have taken whatever energy he had left that night. We promised to see each other soon, but it was a promise neither of us kept, for just a few short months later I received news of his death.

Paul's work here is done, and with it he has advanced Italian American studies by shining the light of American studies on this growing field. While he never completed all he planned, he has left a legacy of thought to future scholars who will certainly benefit from his enormous contributions to the field. We thank Paul for enriching us through his scholarship, his collegiality, and his friendship. Hippocrates wrote, "*Ars longa, vita brevis,*" and Paul's life reminds us that indeed the things one does can live on long after their maker's life when they are done well and with passion and precision. *Grazie*, Paul, for your life and work.

Selected Bibliography

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