


2002

We Weren't Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian/American Literature

Fred L. Gardaphé
CUNY Queens College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs

 Part of the [American Literature Commons](#), [American Popular Culture Commons](#), and the [Literature in English, North America Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gardaphé, Fred L., "We Weren't Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian/American Literature" (2002). *CUNY Academic Works*.
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/198

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Queens College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Publications and Research by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.

We Weren't Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian/American Literature

No one was white before he/she came to America.

James Baldwin, "On Being 'White'...and Other Lies"

I'm tired of being overlooked and then categorized as colorless, as though I've never had a good spaghetti fight in my life. I'm tired of being told to shut up and assimilate.

Rose Romano, from "Vendetta"

Introduction

The interaction on the streets and in the arts of the United States, between Italian Americans and African Americans, has gone virtually unnoticed, except when the two groups have come into conflict, as in the 1989 murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst and in Spike Lee's films Do the Right Thing and Jungle Fever.

Italian/American intellectuals, such as Robert Viscusi, Jerome Kruse and Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick, wrote essays and editorials that attempted to demonstrate that not all Italian Americans were racists. These essays, accompanied by the actions of New York's radical activists, Italian Americans for a Multicultural United States (IAMUS), marked the beginning of a culturally critical interaction which led to the creation of larger public forums such as the 1997 American Italian Historical Association's national conference "Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration between Two Communities." In this article I present an historical context for understanding many of these more

recent activities.

Reference to Blacks in Mario Puzo's The Godfather, as "dark peoples"-- and "animals" "who have no respect for their wives or their families or themselves" (290) is uncomfortably close to the gist of Richard Gambino's attempts to explain the differences between Italian- and African-Americans in his 1974 Blood of My Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans. Gambino, one of the first to make observations of the interaction of the two communities, sees them as having "diametrically opposed value systems" (329). "It is difficult to think of two groups of Americans," he writes, "whose ways of life differ more. The two cultures are at odds with each other in superficial styles and in critical values. The groups clash more and more as ghetto blacks confront lower-middle-class whites in inner cities over efforts to integrate schools and housing and in competition for jobs and political power" (329). Confrontation is inevitable, he suggests because the two groups often inhabit adjacent urban spaces. As evidence Gambino presents examples of how music, body language, and notions of family differ between Blacks and Italians.

A more optimistic observation was put forth by Patrick Gallo in his 1974 study, Ethnic Alienation: The Italian-Americans. Gallo saw enough similarities between Italian and African Americans to suggest the creation of an alliance of, in his words, "whites and Blacks, white-collar and blue-collar workers, based on mutual need and interdependence...Italian-Americans may prove to be a vital ingredient in not only forging that alliance but in serving as the cement that will hold urban centers together. (209)

That Gambino's naive approach has gone unchallenged, and Gallo's ideas ignored, until only recently, are the result of a slowly developing Italian/American intelligentsia. This intelligentsia is producing a great number of poems, stories, essays and book-length studies that challenge Gambino's weak explanations and attempt to fulfill Gallo's prophecy. Thirteen years before either Gambino's or Gallo's analyses appeared, Daniela Gioseffi, put her body and soul on the line in the early 1960s struggle for Civil Rights. She documented her experiences in a short story, "The Bleeding Mimosa," which recounts the terror of a night spent in a Selma, Alabama jail during which she was raped by a southern sheriff. A recent essay by Frank Lentricchia in Lingua Franca, reminds us that the cultural interactions between Italian- and African- Americans did not begin in response to Bensonhurst. In "Confessions of an Ex-Literary Critic, Lentricchia's points to Willard Motley's Knock on Any Door, as a signal text in his early development as a reader and writer. Lentricchia is one of an increasing number of American writers of Italian descent who have explored the interaction of Italian- and African-Americans.

Bensonhurst and Beyond

There is much that the many different peoples who have come to America agree is wonderful about living in this land, but the first lesson any immigrant group learns is that "making it" in this country happens at the expense "un-making" ethnic identity and allegiance to old world customs and behavior. This holds true for intra-cultural institutions as well. When "making it" means moving

from working class, to middle, to upper class, sooner or later we must understand that upward mobility means ascribing to the cultural values that belong to each class and to the category of whiteness; ancestral traditions become ancillary side shows that we can foster only in our spare time.

For Italian Americans, “making it” has come with a high price tag. It has cost them the language of their ancestors--the main means by which history is preserved and heritage passed on from one generation to the next. They've had to trade-in or hide any customs which have been depicted as quaint, but labeled as alien, in order to prove equality to those above them on the ladder of success. In this way, Italian Americans have become white, but a different kind of white than those of the dominant Anglo/Saxon culture. Italian Americans have become whites on a leash. And as long as they behave themselves (act white), as long as they accept the images of themselves as presented in the media (don't cry defamation) and as long as they stay within corporate and cultural boundaries (don't identify with other minorities) they will be allowed to remain white. This behavior has led to Italian Americans being left out of most discussions of multiculturalism. In A Different Mirror, Ronald Takaki's revision of American history the European immigrants and their descendants are either lumped in the falsely monolithic category of whites or overlooked entirely. The fact is that each of these groups has its own unique history of subjugation that aligns it more closely with Takaki's oppressed minorities than with the Anglo majority. We all need to come to grips with the fact that there is a great diversity and much oppression within white America. Until then, we are doomed to repeat the

mistakes of the earlier histories that we are trying to correct.

For too long, the U.S. media were all too ready to help restrict Italians' attempts to assimilate as white Americans. The vast majority of Italian Americans are law-abiding citizens, but you wouldn't know it by watching television, listening to the radio or reading books. We have been viciously framed by the constant repetition of negative portrayals. Most histories of mafia in America begin with the 1890 murder of the corrupt New Orleans Police Chief Hennessey. The aftermath of his murder led to one of the largest recorded mass lynchings in this country's history. America's obsession with the mafia has overshadowed the real history of Italians in America that includes indentured servitude, mass lynchings, Klu Klux Klan terrorism against Italians, and strong participation in civil rights struggles. For Italian Americans, overt oppression has given way to more covert techniques of discrimination. Italians have replaced Indians and blacks as the accepted "bad guys" in films, and this image is reinforced and perpetuated through contemporary remakes of The Untouchables and the establishment of museums such as "Capone's Chicago."

These portrayals have become the building blocks of an American cultural imagination that has petrified a stereotype. This never ending reproduction of negative stereotypes has so impoverished American minds that anything Italian is immediately connected to gangsterism and ignorance. To become American, Italians would have to do everything in their power to show how they were unlike the gangsters and buffoons who dominated public representation of their culture. As the first and second generation achieved material success, they were able to

direct energies toward defending Italians from defamatory attacks. A number of social and civic organizations such as The Sons of Italy, UNICO and Chicago's Joint Civic Committee of Italian Americans were strong in their battle against defamation and their efforts to change America's myopic perception of Italian/American culture. But their approaches, by necessity, were restricted to taking defensive stands, severely limiting their ability to mount any type of counter-offense.

While their efforts in the past have made overt discrimination a memory, Italian Americans are still plagued by covert manipulation of their image in American culture. This manipulation is fostered by what critic Robert Viscusi calls, a lack of "discursive power." In an essay written in response to the 1989 Yusef Hawkins murder in Italian/American Bensonhurst, Viscusi pointed to the ease with which the Italian American community, both local and national, slipped into public silence in the aftermath of the event. Viscusi ascribes this silence to the inability of Italian Americans to develop power over their language. "Persons who lack discursive power," he writes, "are often reduced to servile responses--to violence or to dumbshow--when confronted with serious personal, social, or political problems" ("Breaking the Silence" 3). The three components toward gaining discursive power, according to Viscusi, are mastery over language (both English and Italian), the development of historical narratives, and a return to the tradition of dialectic that fostered internal critiques and oppositional voices. Viscusi's essay tells Italian Americans that they can no longer afford to wait for attitudes toward their heritage to change, they must change them their selves.

While the earlier generations' battles were fought and won on the economic and sociological front, the battle for the grandchildren of the immigrants has moved to the cultural front. Financial resources, the rewards for having "made it," would need to be invested in promoting representations that Italian Americans can live with. This is the only chance Italian Americans have to effectively change the image of Italians in America. A feeble attempt at an explanation for the racial murder was made by Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick. In her essay, "On Being White, Female and Born in Bensonhurst," she explains, "Italian Americans in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality; the slightest pressures turns those qualities into prejudice and racism" (7). Unfortunately, Torgovnick makes no effort to explore either the roots of those racist qualities, nor the fact that not all Italian Americans shared those qualities. For this perspective we must turn to sociologist and past-president of the American Italian Historical Association, Jerome Krase, who, in his essay, "Bensonhurst, Brooklyn: Italian-American Victimizers and Victims," examines the role of Italian/American professionals in the development of alternative sources of information about Italian Americans. Krase is in search for the reasons why Italian Americans are "perceived as being so much more [biased] than other ethnic groups" (44). One reason he points to is geographical proximity: "Given that working class Italian-American populations occupy residential territories which are directly in the path of minority group expansion, they are the most likely to experience inter-racial and inter-ethnic conflict on a local level" (44). In a second essay, Krase points to the ignorance of their own history as one reason why Italians might lash out

against blacks. “Parallels between the African American and Italian American experiences are numerous,” he writes, “and should be the source of cooperation rather than conflict” (51).

Examples of these parallels abound in recent writings by Italian Americans who have both broken the silence and created the historical narratives that will challenge long established notions of ethnic whiteness. In his keynote address to the 1994 American Italian Historical Association’s national conference, Rudolph Vecoli challenged the notion of Italian Americans being white. Using numerous examples from history in which Italian Americans were not always considered white, he argued that:

Our experience has taught us the fallacy of the very idea of race and the mischief of racial labels. It has taught us that both total assimilation and total separatism are will-o’-the-wisps, unachievable--and undesirable if they were. It has taught us that a healthy ethnicity is compatible with, indeed essential to, a healthy America. For these reasons, we, Italian Americans, have something important to contribute to the national dialogue. (17)

Vecoli concludes his speech with the idea that the key to Italian American participation is the creation of the ability to define our selves, “distinguished by our unique experience” that is not “white, nor black, nor brown, nor red, nor yellow” (17). But regardless of how well Vecoli substantiates the historical racism against Italians, no matter how well he argues the point that Italian Americans have been categorically excluded from the recent benefits of attention given to a

multicultural United States, there remains the fact that at some point, Italian Americans became white. This is a point made by the writing on whiteness of which David Roediger's is seminal.

In a paper presented at a 1996 Newberry Library summer seminar, Roediger and James R. Barrett, tell us "Italians, involved in a spectacular international Diaspora in the early twentieth century, were racialized as the 'Chinese of Europe' in many lands. But in the U. S. their racialization was pronounced, as 'guinea's' evolution suggests, more likely to connect Italians with Africans" ("Inbetween Peoples 7). But the whiteness of Italian Americans was more delayed than totally denied, and thus the danger, according to Roediger is not only swallowing the myth of white superiority, but "being swallowed by the lie of whiteness" (Roediger, qtd. in Stowe 74.) This danger is very real as today's Italian Americans grow up ignorant of their history and firm in their belief of being white. As poet Diane di Prima noted in a response to Vecoli's keynote address: "In most ways, my brothers and I were pushed into being white, as my parents understood that term" (25) which included being forbidden to speak Italian. Di Prima argues that:

We need to admit that this pseudo 'white' identity with its present non-convenience was not something that just fell on us out of the blue, but something that many Italian Americans grabbed at with both hands. Many felt that their culture, language, food, songs, music, identity, was a small price to pay for entering American mainstream. Or they thought, like my parents probably did, that

they could keep these good Italian things in private and become 'white' in public. (27)

That Italian Americans could have it both ways might be seen as an advantage, but according to Noel Ignatiev, choosing whiteness means clinging to "the most serious barrier to becoming fully American" ("Immigrants and Whites" 18). Ignatiev, who with John Garvey edits the journal Race Traitor, presents the most radical alternative to Italian Americans, that of aiding in the abolishment of whiteness altogether. "Normally the discussion of immigrant assimilation is framed by efforts to estimate how much of the immigrants' traditional culture they lose in becoming American. Far more significant, however, than the choice between the old and the new is the choice between two identities which are both new to them: white and American" (23).

Although racial discrimination against Italians was more prevalent in the past, it has not disappeared. Today, Italian/American youth suffer from association with a different stereotype; the image of the organ-grinding immigrant has been replaced by the mafioso and the dumb street kid ala Rocky Balboa. These images do not come from family interaction, but from the larger society. So that when Italian Americans look into the cultural mirror, they receive a distorted view, as though it was one of those funny mirrors found in an amusement park. Consciously or unconsciously those distorted images affect their identity, and they must face the reality that the dominant culture is comfortable with Italians as serio/comic figures, caricatures made up of the most distorted aspects of their culture. The question all Italian Americans must

confront these days is, "Who controls the image making process and why are their social images so distorted?" Reinforcement of a positive cultural identity that was created in the home is necessary for the maintenance of and a willingness to continue that identification outside the home. If children get the idea that to be Italian is to be what the media and white histories say Italian is, then they will either avoid it, if it shames them, or embrace it if it gets them attention. Philosopher Raymond Belliotti, in Seeking Identity, writes, "Italian Americans have been submerged in the cruel, overly broad category of 'White Europeans,' a category which eviscerates their particularity and renders their special grievances invisible. Italian Americans are given the shroud, but not the substance of privilege" (163). But in some instances the "particularity" of Italian Americans has been recognized.

In "Italian Americans as a Cognizable Racial Group," New York State Supreme Court Justice, Dominic R. Massaro surveys recent court decisions which have established Italian Americans as a racial group subject to protection by New York law, especially in cases of Affirmative Action. As a result of this protection, the first chair of Italian American Studies was awarded to the John D. Calandra Institute in a discrimination lawsuit against the City University of New York system. The decision in favor of the plaintiff in "Scelsa v. the City University of New York" solidified the position of Italian Americans as "inbetween people," as people capable of substantiating discrimination claims, at least in the state of New York, and as people able to take advantage of the privileges offered to whites. Evidence of this continues to spread across the country. Recently Judge

Massaro's article helped an Italian/American professor gain a reversal in a tenure dispute in the University of California state system. So for Italian Americans, at least for the time being, their status as whites is flexible, perhaps flexible enough for us to refer to them as off-whites. But as Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out in a brilliant review essay on recent publications in whiteness studies, African/American culture has always influenced American culture. "If we apply to our culture," she writes, "the 'one drop' rule that in the United States has long classified anyone with one drop of black blood as black, then all of American culture is black" ("Interrogating 'Whiteness'" 454). What follows is my contribution to the remapping of American culture through a survey of recent works in which Italian Americans strive to contribute to the abolition of whiteness.

Black Like We

In Reading Race: White American Poets and the Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century, Aldon Nielsen uncovers the racism implied in the works of white canonized poets of the twentieth century. Nielsen skillfully demonstrates that white American writers have, often consciously, fostered a tradition of racism in their use of language, especially in their depictions of African/Americans as "the black thing." Nielsen's Reading Race, winner of the 1986 South Atlantic Modern Language Association Award brings us new ways of reading traditional literature by closely observing language at work. "Our language has come to act as that metaphorical veil of which W. E. B. DuBois speaks so often, separating two national groups and occluding our vision of one another. This veil is maintained between the two terms of a racial dialectic, one of which is privileged"

(1). By analyzing that “veil” Nielsen demonstrates that the images of the black other, created by white writers, are fictions created out of the need to separate white selves from black others. Nielsen's study provides us with a model by which we can uncover even the unconscious perpetuation of racism in modern and contemporary poetry. Racist discourse, as he tells us, is “susceptible of dissolution.” And he offers Herman Melville's “Benito Cereno” as the only true example of a white writer breaking through the racist language barrier. Perhaps, most importantly, Nielsen raises the question of whether we can ever expect to “think in a language to avoid having our thought directed by the language of those from whom we learn” (163).

In literature by Italian/American writers, we can find examples of just the opposite of Nielsen's thesis, fictions that are created out of the need to connect Italian white selves to black others.

In her first novel, currently in search of a publisher, Mary Bucci Bush, author of a story collection, Places of Light, turns her attention to a great historical void: the story of Italian/American life on southern plantations during the early 1900s. Though they were called Italian colonies, to which Italians were shipped directly from Italy, many were little more than new versions of slavery. Bush's grandmother had gone to the south when she was seven years old. Though this was a common experience, very little has been published about it. Fueled by her grandmother's stories, Bush began to research the phenomenon for her novel. She found that Blacks and Italians lived next door to each other, in separate plantation shacks, and socialized with each other. Most of the Italians

had not been farmers when they came over. "Quite often," says Bush, "the Blacks taught the Italians how to survive, how to work the farm, and how to speak English." She demonstrates this in an excerpt published as a chapbook entitled "Drowning," which features the friendship between two children: one, named Isola, is the daughter of Italian immigrants, the other, Birdie, is the daughter of freed-black slaves who have become sharecroppers. In the following passage, Isola divulges a secret:

"My Papa says we all have to watch out now," Isola told Birdie.

"What for?"

Isola looked around. She moved closer to Birdie and lowered her voice. "That if we play with Nina the Americans will shoot us. Or maybe burn down our house." [Nina's father has led workers off the plantation in search of better work and is being chased by the owner's henchmen called the Gracey Men, who are members of the Klu Klux Klan.]

Birdie took a step back and looked at Isola. "Where you got such a crazy idea?"

"That's what the Gracey men do," Isola said. "That's what my Paper told me."

Birdie put her hand on her hips. "You dumb or something? White folks don't shoot white folks." She walked faster, so that Isola had to trot to catch up with her.

“But we’re not white,” Isola told her. “We’re Italian.” (11)

Bush’s novel dramatizes the lack of racial separation between the two groups. “Eventually the adults did realize that the Blacks were treated differently,” says Bush, “and were frightened by that.” It wasn't until a few years after her grandmother's death that Bush tried to discover Sunnyside, the plantation that her grandmother's family had moved to in 1904. This plantation was one of many that were investigated in 1907 by the Federal government because of charges of peonage. “Italian agents had worked against their own people,” says Bush. “They had them sign papers, the contents of which were never truthfully explained. Some people had their passage paid by the plantation owners, but they were instructed not to let anyone know this because it was illegal. They were told to say they were going to meet a cousin or a paesano who was paying their passage. In the end, no one was ever convicted of this peonage.” Bush suggests that one explanation for this importation of Italian laborers is that white southerners, overwhelmed by the size of the Black population, wanted to diminish it by bringing in Italian workers. In no way, says Bush, were Italians considered to be equal to the whites. This suggestion is backed by journalistic evidence from the period. In “The Italian Cotton Growers: The Negroes’ Problem,” Alfred Stone, a wealthy Delta cotton planter, expressed his hopes that the Italian, whom he says has “demonstrated his superiority over the negro as an agriculturalist” (123), will continue immigrating to the South.

Bush has published three significant excerpts from this novel-in-progress, most recently in the fall, 1997 Voices in Italian Americana. The first excerpt,

“Planting” appeared in The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian/American Women’s Fiction, edited by Mary Jo Bona.

Chuck Wachtel, who is half-Jewish and half Italian/American complicated the whiteness of Italian Americans in his latest novel, The Gates by creating a protagonist, Primo Thomas, who was born to an African/American doctor and his Italian/American wife. While Wachtel does not spend much time on giving us the details of Primo’s mixed ancestry, he reminds us that while there are many ways in which these two cultures are different, there are many more in which they’re similar. In a subtle stroke, Wachtel uses the vegetable eggplant, which in Italian has a double meaning and is used to refer to black skinned people, to have Primo both acknowledge his Italianness and the racism he experiences from Italian Americans. When Primo and his friends attend a Saint Anthony festa in Little Italy an Italian/American family is staring at him in obvious hatred. Primo walks up to the family and says, “When my mother made ‘moolinyam,’ she’d never used too much cheese. She used to say real Italians know that God made eggplant so you could taste it, not disguise the flavor....” And then turning to the daughter, he continues, “My mother also used to say that the dark, shiny skin of an eggplant was beautiful. It was a mystery to her how anyone could make a bad word out of something so beautiful. She like to kiss my arms when she said it. Your mother ever kiss your arms? (15)” While Primo’s black skin might keep others from recognizing his Italianess, his memory of his mother, sustained through his Aunt Olivia, keeps him connected to a past that continues to nurture him long after his parents have died.

Non-identification with white culture is the theme of Anthony Valerio's bold, new work-in-progress entitled "BlackItalian." In a selection, "Water for Toni Morrison," published in VIA, Valerio recounts, in his trademark mix of fiction and non-fiction, an encounter with the Nobel Prize winning African American author. Through the character Gloria Lewis (the pseudonym for a famous black writer with whom Valerio had a relationship) Valerio learns about Morrison's life and the pain that doesn't get transmitted during her public presentations. Knowing what he does about her private life, Valerio writes: "Being the unfortunate Italian that I am, I felt proud, blessed that this pain had passed from Toni Morrison to Gloria Lewis down to me, from women to a man, from Black women to an Olive man" (99). The story flashes from the protagonist's inner thoughts which come while watching Morrison being interviewed by Charlie Rose on public television, to the time when he accompanied Lewis to a film screening reception attended by Morrison. At that reception, Morrison asks for a glass of water, and Valerio, whom Gloria Lewis had nicknamed Rio, is assigned the task of fetching it. With all the gallantry of Don Quixote combined with the practicality of Sancho Panza, Valerio turns a simple errand into a quest. Because he thought he "had to be a man among Blacks" was without his usual leather shoulder bag that his Bensonhurst aunt told him only girls carried; this bag "had everything anybody needed right there. Rubber bands, paper clips, matches, flyers, pencils, pennies-things picked up on the street..." because he had learned "that big people sometimes need little things. That what one person throws away, another person needs. This was one way people connect" (102).

As the protagonist is in search for the water, there is a flashback to the television interview. When the conversation comes around to racism Valerio is horrified and embarrassed “when she said that when Italians came here, they became white. I have known more Italians than Blacks, perhaps less intimately in a sexual sense, socially to be sure, and not one Italian in the dark recesses feels white” (103). After he returns from his quest with two paper cups of water, the narrative returns to the interview and Morrison’s first recollection of racism. “In her grammar school in the landlocked midwest, she had a friend, a little Italian girl, and little Toni Morrison had taught her friend how to read and then one day the Italian came to school and would not go near her” (103). And with that, Valerio leaves the Morrison interview and returns to the reception and the last time he and Gloria Lewis were together with Toni Morrison. The juxtaposition of the story of his waterboy errand to Morrison’s earliest recollection of racism, serves as a baptism of sorts through which not only the protagonist, but all Italian Americans can be washed of the sins of racism by realizing the absurdity of it all.

More militant in her attempt to avoid being white is poet and publisher Rose Romano. In her essay, “Coming Out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big Sister is Watching,” Romano argues that respect in the lesbian community is gained through recognition of one’s suffering, which depends on skin color: “The lighter one’s skin, the less respect one is entitled to” (161). “I have been told that by calling myself Olive I am evading my ‘responsibility of guilt.’ Because I am a light-skinned woman living in the United States, it is accepted that my grandparents, whether they owned slaves themselves, belonged to the group

who did own slaves and were entitled to all the benefits. If they chose not to take advantage of those benefits, it's their own fault. When I tell lesbians that Southern Italians and Sicilians didn't even begin to arrive in this country until twenty years after the slave days were over I am told that this is a 'wrong use of facts' and that today I am a member of an oppressor group and that I can choose to take advantage of my 'white -skin privilege.' Unable to gain respect for her own experiences, Romano criticizes the lesbian publishing community for denying access to Italian American writers.

With Italian American: The Racializing of and Ethnic Identity David A. J. Richards brings a more legalistic perspective to the discussion of Italians and whiteness. Richards, a grandson of Italian immigrants who came from the hill towns of Campania, sheds light on how American racism kept Italian Americans from knowing "both their own traditions in Italy and the very real struggles of their grandparents against injustice in both Italy and the United States" (6-7). Richards draws on cases of race, women and sexual preference rights as he interprets "moral slavery," the backfiring of a racism created by the denial of basic human rights to people who are dehumanized so that those rights can be denied. Richards concludes his study by offering a "rights-based protest" in an attempt to counter the effects of moral slavery. Such a protest consists of first "claiming rights denied in one's own voice" and then "engaging in reasonable discourse that challenges the dominant stereotype in terms of which one's group has been dehumanized" (214). Richards calls for us all to see that: "It is no longer an acceptable basis for any people's Americanization that they subscribe

to the terms of American cultural racism” (236). This is precisely what the authors I have presented in this essay do.

Conclusion

Mary Bush, Chuck Wachtel, Anthony Valerio, Rose Romano, David Richards are but a handful of American writers of Italian descent who, in the words of Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, are “race traitors.” They are joined by poet and Sparrow publisher Felix Stefanile whose poem “Hubie” recounts the integration of his “eyetalian” Army Unit in World War Two and his friendship with a black soldier. In this poem Stefanile tells us that after the war came another war: “A black man and a white man, that’s for sure,/ this other war, and the cagey cowardice/ of habit, turning honest blood to ice./ I think that we were brothers once, “The Twins,”/ the fellows called us, masking their wide grins./ What’s left is poetry, the penance for my sins (77).” The penance is the recognition that outside of the army, the “Twins” could never share the same experiences again. Such identification with African/Americans abounds. In Frank Lentricchia’s imaginative auto-fiction, The Edge of Night, the author creates a character who avenges JFK’s murder in the guise of “a multicultural avenger, the black Italian-American Othello,” which contains “all the best of dark and bright” and who “croons out of the black part of my soul, Has anyone here seen my old friend Martin” (165)? Prior to his death in January of 1992, Pietro di Donato, author of Christ in Concrete completed a controversial, and yet unpublished a novel entitled The American Gospels, in which Christ, in the form of a black woman, comes to Earth at the end of the world to cast judgment on

key historical figures of contemporary America.

As I hope to have shown, Italian- and African-American interaction is more complex than earlier scholars have suggested, and the literature produced by Italian/American writers contains the fuel to fire the slogan of whiteness studies coined by Ignatiev and Garvey “Treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity.” This treason is evidenced by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum’s study Black Madonnas, which makes a case for intercultural interdependence on images of what the Italians refer to as La Madonna nera, or the black madonna and her latest work-in-progress, Godmothers and Others of Colors. Le Comari: A Sicilian Story. Birnbaum’s ground breaking research has earned her induction into the African American Multicultural Educators Hall of Fame in 1996. The treason also exists in films such as Chaz Palmentieri’s screenplay, A Bronx Tale, which became a film directed by Robert DeNiro, which depicts a young Italian American who falls in love with a black girl. If not totally black, Italians have certainly complicated the notion of whiteness in America so that they are neither totally white, and it is this in-between status, that makes them likely candidates for assisting in the abolition of whiteness in the United States. For those who can naively say we’re not black, there are others who counter with the truth, that we weren’t always white.

Fred Gardaphe

SUNY at Stony Brook

Works Cited

Ashyk, Dan, Fred Gardaphe and Anthony Tamburri. Shades of Black and White:

- Conflict and Collaboration between Two Communities. Staten Island, NY: The American Italian Historical Association. 1999.
- Baldwin, James. "On Being 'White'... And Other Lies." Essence. (April 1984): 80+.
- Barrett, James R. and David Roediger. "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class." Paper Presented at the Newberry Library, Summer, 1996.
- Belliotti, Raymond A. Seeing Identity: Individualism Versus Community in an Ethnic Context. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995.
- Birnbaum, Lucia Chiavola. Black Madonnas: feminism, religion, and politics in Italy. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993.
- Bush, Mary Bucci. "Planting." The Voices We Carry: Short Fiction by Italian American Women. Edited by Mary Jo Bona. Montreal: Guernica Editions, 1994. 33-56.
- di Prima, Diane. "'Don't Solidify the Adversary!' A Response to Rudolph Vecoli." Through the Looking Glass: Italian and Italian/American Images in the Media. Selected Essays from the 27th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association. Mary Jo Bona and Anthony Julian Tamburri, eds. Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1996. 24-29.
- Fishkin, Shelley Fisher. "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' 'Complicating 'Blackness: Remapping American Culture.'" American Quarterly. 47.3 (September 1995): 428-536.

- Gallo, Patrick J. Ethnic Alienation: The Italian -Americans. Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1974.
- Gioseffi, Daniela. "The Bleeding Mimosa." Voices in Italian American. 2.1 (1991): 59-65.
- Ignatiev, Noel. "Immigrants and Whites." Race Traitor. Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, eds. New York: Routledge, 1996. 15-23.
- Krase, Jerome. "Bensonhurst, Brooklyn: Italian-American Victimizers and Victims." Voices in Italian Americana. 5.2 (fall 1994): 43-53.
- LaGumina, Salvatore J. Wop!, A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States. San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973.
- Massaro, Dominic R. "Italian Americans as a Cognizable Racial Group." Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society. Proceedings of the Symposium of the American Italian Historical Association, 1993. Forum Italicum: SUNY, Stonybrook, NY, 1994. 44-55.
- Puzo, Mario. The Godfather. New York: Fawcett, 1969.
- Richards, David A.J. Italian American: The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Roediger, David. Toward the Abolition of Whiteness. New York: Verso, 1994.
- Romano, Rose. "Coming Out Olive in the Lesbian Community: Big Sister is Watching." Social Pluralism and Literary History: The Literature of the Italian Emigration. Francesco Loriggio, Ed. Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1996. 161-175.

- . "Vendetta." la bella figura: a choice. Rose Romano, Ed. San Francisco: malafemmina press, 1993. 35-42.
- Stefanile, Felix. "Hubie." The Dance at St. Gabriel's. Brownsville, OR: Story Line Press, 1995. 71-77.
- Stone, Alfred. "The Italian Cotton Growers: The Negroes' Problem." South Atlantic Quarterly. (January, 1905). Reprinted in A Documentary History of Italian Americans. Wayne Moquin, ed. New York: Praeger, 1974. 122-125.
- Stowe, David W. "Uncolored People: The Rise of Whiteness Studies." Lingua Franca. (September-October 1996): 68-77.
- Takaki, Ronald. A Different Mirror. New York: Little Brown & Co., 1993.
- Tamburri, Anthony, Paul Giordano and Fred Gardaphe From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1991.
- Torgovnick, Marianna DeMarco. "On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst." Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. 3-18.
- Valerio, Anthony. "Water for Toni Morrison." Voices in Italian Americana. 7.1 (spring 1996) 99-104.
- Vecoli, Rudolph J., "'Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?'" Through the Looking Glass: Italian and Italian/American Images in the Media. Selected Essays from the 27th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association. Mary Jo Bona and Anthony Julian Tamburri, eds. Staten

- Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1996. 3-17.
- Viscusi, Robert. "Breaking the Silence: Strategic Imperatives for Italian American Culture." Voices in Italian Americana. 1.1 (1990) 1-14.
- Wachtel, Chuck. The Gates. New York: Viking/Penguin, 1995.