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A DARKER PAST: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN AMERICAN RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS, 1886-1920

by

PETER VELLON

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2003

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11/19/02
Date

Dr. Philip V. Cannistraro
Chair of Examining Committee

11/19/02
Date

Dr. James Oakes
Executive Officer

Dr. Colin Palmer

Dr. Thomas Kessner

Dr. Marta Petrusewicz

Dr. David Nasaw

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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Abstract

A DARKER PAST: THE DEVELOPMENT OF ITALIAN AMERICAN RACIAL CONSCIOUSNESS, 1886-1920

By

Peter Vellon

Adviser: Professor Philip V. Cannistraro

This work will examine how Italian immigrants interpreted questions of race and whiteness upon their arrival in the United States and how Italian racial consciousness gave way to a unique Italian American racial outlook. This process would take decades and be informed not only by racial attitudes cultivated in Italy, but an exposure to, and emerging awareness of, American racism. This hybrid consciousness was characterized by racial distinctions based upon various, often overlapping categories of analysis, such as skin color, racial hierarchy, and concepts of "civilization" and "savagery."

Although they had been exposed to aspects of "blackness" in Italy, southern Italian immigrants did not enter the country with a pre-formed idea of whiteness in place, nor did they immediately choose whiteness upon arrival. Indeed, Italian immigrants were perceived by Americans as an inferior race and characterized as between white and black. It would only be after decades of experience in United States society that Southern Italian immigrants would be in a position to see themselves as "American" and "white." The Italian American reaction to the lynching of Italian immigrants and African Americans in

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the South—the home of Jim Crow—revealed a growing understanding of how racial hierarchies worked in the United States. It was this knowledge which re-enforced and expedited the process whereby Italian immigrants distanced themselves from a darker past and groped unevenly toward acceptance not only as American, but as white.

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There are many people responsible for the completion of this project.

I was fortunate to work with a number of outstanding scholars in the History Department at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Professor Colin Palmer served as second reader for my dissertation and has been a constant and invaluable source of knowledge, support, and friendship. I thank Thomas Kessner, Marta Petrucewicz, and David Nasaw, for serving on my Dissertation Committee and providing welcome comments and criticisms that will hopefully make my dissertation a better book. Thanks also to Carol Berkin for her advice and support.

Without the camaraderie of friends struggling through the same problems, fears, and anxieties, doctoral work can be a daunting, even overwhelming, task. Fortunately, I surrounded myself with a team of experts who helped me find my way through the *horror* of graduate school. To Erica Ball, Kathleen Feeley, Terence Kissack, Cindy Lobel, Delia Mellis, and Michael Norton, I say thank you. Without you all I never would have gotten to this point.

Many others have provided support and friendship through the process in direct and indirect ways. Thanks are extended to Dr. Joseph V. Scelsa, Acting Vice President for Institutional Development, Queens College/CUNY and Dean of the John D.Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College/CUNY; Mr. Ivan Cohill, for doing his best to distract me from my work with the lure of Rosa's Pizza and Dunkin Donuts; and Mr. Richard DiMedia, for believing in me.

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My family has been an integral part of this process throughout, and I finally can answer their two most frequently asked questions. Yes, I am out of *college*. And, yes, I have finished my *paper*.

I thank my parents, Philip and Anne Vellon for their unconditional love and support even though they weren't quite sure what this Ph.D. business was all about. I hope I have made you proud. Thank you to my brothers, sisters, and their spouses: Michael & Maryann Vellon, Debbie & Steve Zuccaro, Kathy & Kevin Carroll, and Stephen & Mary Vellon, and to all of my many, many, nieces and nephews—you know who you are.

I am very fortunate to have married into an extremely understanding and supportive family. Every parent's nightmare is for his or her daughter or son to marry a Ph.D. student, however, Augusto and Maria Pasquariello have been the exception. Their encouragement and patience has been greatly appreciated. Augusto Pasquariello was also instrumental in the completion of this project by translating more Italian language newspaper articles than I care to remember. I am eternally grateful for his effort, time and diligence. Thank you to my sister-in-law, Dr. Giovanna Pasquariello, future brother-in-law Saverio Raspanti, sister-in-law and brother-in-law Adrienne and Carmine Falco, and niece Alexandra Rose. Your positive and upbeat support helped me to get to the finish line.

My *cugina* Nella Giusto came to the United States for a vacation during the summer of 2000 and ended up helping me translate articles. I thank her for her determination in the hot sun to "do another one." I hope someday I can repay the favor.

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There are three people most directly responsible for the completion of this project. I met Philip V. Cannistraro in 1997 and remember feeling that I had finally found my dissertation advisor. Immediately he expressed an interest in what I was doing and began the process of pushing me to be a better scholar. If he had known what he was in for, he probably would have changed his mind. His determination for me to complete the project sometimes dwarfed my own. However frustrating that must have been for him, he never wavered in his support—knowing when to crack the whip and when to ease up on the reins. And, though the process would leave him exhausted, he had succeeded in teaching me an immeasurable amount, not only regarding history, but life. I believe his level of commitment, caring, and loyalty is un-matched for an advisor and mentor—and his example has inspired me to do the same for my students. I am most proud and honored to be able to call him a friend and look forward to working with him again.

I do not possess the ability to properly articulate in words how much Rose Pasquariello-Vellon means to me. She has been my spiritual and emotional source of strength from the moment I met her 13 years ago and is self-less to a fault. During the periods when I was ready to give up and "get a real job" it was Rose who demanded that I stay in school and finish—warning me that I would regret it the rest of my life. She did this all the while knowing that continuing in school would entail tremendous sacrifice on her part. I owe everything I have accomplished to her.

Through this process she has tolerated all of my fears and insecurities of which there are many; my tendency to put things off to the last minute; not to mention my Oscar Madison-like habits. Why anyone would put up with me I haven't the slightest idea. Yet, she has been my strongest advocate, my ally, my best friend and my soul mate.

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While researching and writing this dissertation she served as a critical sounding board and read my chapter drafts over and over again. She was instrumental in helping me construct, and re-construct, my argument and has been a valuable and patient copy-editor, putting up with my defensive reactions to her comments. She has also tirelessly translated Italian language articles, taking time away from her own work to do so. She continually inspires me, and there is no one for whom I have more love, respect and admiration. She has influenced me immeasurably in the way I perceive the world, relationships, and life and I am a much better person for knowing her.

When Jack Thomas was born on November 19, 2001 our lives changed forever. He has so completely taken hold of us it is amazing. And, although he is not yet aware of what a dissertation is, he should know that he was an integral part of the project. His wonderful disposition, firm hugs and pats on the back, not to mention his many smiles and kisses, allowed me to temporarily forget about work that needed to be done. His unconditional love has sustained me and kept me going every day. If this experience teaches him anything I hope it is that he can do anything he sets his mind to. I never want him to forget that.

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Introduction

This dissertation began as an effort to explain the origins of a murder. Following the killing of Yusef Hawkins, an African American youth, on August 23,1989, protesters filled the streets of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn seeking justice for what they considered a heinous racial crime. Hawkins had been shot by a mob of Italian American boys who were apparently "protecting" their turf from an unwelcome invader. As African Americans marched through the streets of the mostly Italian American neighborhood, they were greeted in some instances by racial taunts and displays of watermelons. The media focused on this scene, which is widely thought to be representative of the relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans. Spurred by other incidents in New York during this period, as well as by movies that portrayed Italians as mobsters who preyed upon Blacks, this image remained ingrained in the minds of many.[1]

The history of this relationship is much more complex than contemporary events would suggest. Indeed, the press hardly reported that there were Catholic priests and neighborhood residents who expressed their sorrow for the Hawkins murder by laying

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[1]John Kifner, "Bensonhurst: A Tough Code in Defense of a Closed World," *The New York Times*, 1 September 1989; Helen Barolini, "Buried Alive By Language," in *Chiaroscuro: Essays of Identity* (West Lafayette:Bordighera,Inc, 1997); Giorgio Bertellini, "New York City and the Representation of Italian Americans in the Cinema" in Philip V.Cannistraro, ed., *The Italians of New York* (NY: The New York Historical Society,1999), 115-128.

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wreaths where the incident occurred--an "event" captured in the triptych by painter Maria (Scatuccio) Manhattan. The story, I would argue, is not one of fixed and deep-seated hostility, but rather of complex evolution over time.

Within immigration historiography the necessary correctives to Oscar Handlin's work depicting immigrants as blank slates entering the United States have illuminated our understanding of immigrant life by restoring agency to the lives of immigrants. These works delineated the ways in which immigrants brought with them, transformed, and adapted, their cultural lives into American society.[2] The same principles apply to questions of racial consciousness. We must not assume that immigrants from Southern Italy either came without an already formed and deeply embedded racial consciousness or that attitudes toward African Americans were already fixed. In order to come to a better understanding of how, and why, southern Italian race consciousness about Africans Americans mutated and evolved, it is necessary to consider both their place of origin and their experience in the United States.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the nature of Italian immigration to the United States changed markedly. Up to this point, Italian immigrants hailed predominantly from Northern Italy and were largely of middle-class and aristocratic

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[2]See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of the Uprooted" *Journal of American History* 51, no.3 (1964); Virginia Yans-McLaughlin, *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo,1880-1930* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1971); Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Immigrant Mobility in New York City, 1880-1915* (Oxford University Press, New York:1977); Donna R.Gabaccia, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change Among Italian Immigrants,1880-1930* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1984).

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background. By the 1890s the "new" Italian immigrants were chiefly peasants and artisans from the Southern regions of the peninsula.[3] Coming from a world in which they were considered racially inferior by Northern Europeans, as well as by their own countrymen in Northern Italy, Southern Italians entered this country with a multi-level racial consciousness. Distinct from previous immigrants who had arrived earlier in the nineteenth century, such as the Irish, or eastern European Jews arriving at the same time as the Italians, southern Italians carried with them a racial awareness of "blacks" informed by their proximity to northern Africa, as well as by a history that encompassed "darker peoples." In an effort to explain Irish immigrants' embrace of whiteness and opposition to African Americans as a process that began in the United States and not Ireland, David Roediger maintains the "Irish were not race-conscious in the sense that Irish Americans would be. There was some noting of regional color differences in Ireland though most residents had seen no one of African descent."[4] This was not the case for southern Italians, who were derisively labeled "Africans" by northern counterparts, and whose culture was replete with a variety of "black" discourses.

How southern Italians perceived themselves racially, and where they placed

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[3]Out of a total population of approximately fourteen million in the South at the time of national unification in 1860-1870, at least five million-over a third of the population-had left by the outbreak of World War I. Over four million immigrants from Southern Italy went to America and comprised roughly 80% of the total Italian immigration to the United States. Erik Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus: An Informal History of the Italians in the New World* (Little, Brown & Co.,Boston: 1973), 138.

[4]David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso, London:1991), 137-138.

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African Americans on a racial hierarchy, cannot be taken for granted. Further, how white Americans and African Americans perceived Italians racially deeply influenced the relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans. On one level we must explore the deeply ingrained contemporary views of the presumed inferiority of Italian Americans. On another level, we need to examine how cultural expression with regard to "darker peoples" reflected Italian American ideas about where they fit within the racial classifications of white and black, and of non-European and European, that they found or that were re-enforced in the United States. Italy's attempts at African colonization in the 1890s and the coverage of these events in the Italian American press provide one avenue for exploring these ideas. Still another approach is to recognize that Italian American racial opinion was not a monolithic construct, for differing political ideologies reflected different ideas on the subject. Further, this work will explore the texture of racial categories through which Italian immigrants filtered their experiences with African Americans upon arriving in the United States. For example, racial distinctions were made based upon various, often overlapping, categories of analysis, such as skin color, racial hierarchy, or the dichotomy of "civilization" and "savagery."

My primary focus will be how this Italian American worldview changed and evolved while living within the United States. The overriding theme, then, will pertain to how Southern Italians wrestled with matters of race and whiteness. Southern Italian immigrants did not simply enter through the gates of Ellis Island with a pre-formed idea

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of whiteness in place, nor did they immediately choose whiteness upon arrival.[5] As David Roediger and James Barrett have argued, whiteness was never a clear choice that was made by immigrants.[6] Upon their arrival they were not seen as "white" and did not necessarily consider, or view, themselves as white. It would only be after decades of experience in the United States society that Southern Italian immigrants would be in a position to choose "whiteness." This process would take decades and be informed not only by racial baggage brought from Italy, but also their exposure to, and emerging awareness of, American racism. Perceived by Americans as "inbetween" white and black, Italian immigrants would at times experience first-hand, and in many ways, learn from, what it meant to be considered non-white in American society. The Italian American reaction to the lynching of Italian immigrants and African Americans in the South—the home of Jim Crow—revealed a sympathetic understanding of how racial hierarchies worked in the United States. It would be this knowledge which re-enforced and expedited the process whereby Italian immigrants would distance themselves from a darker past and grope unevenly to be accepted not only as American, but white.

Examining a period that roughly coincides with the years from 1886 to 1920, this dissertation will use New York City as its principal locus to study the changing racial

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[5] For an opposing point of view see Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (Oxford University Press, New York, forthcoming).

[6]David R.Roediger and James Barrett, "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 16 (1997): 28-29.

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consciousness of Italian immigrants through their perception of African Americans. The dates chosen are significant because they correspond to major watersheds in the Italian American experience. Mass immigration to the United States would begin during the 1880s coinciding with consistent outbreaks of violence against Italian immigrants. In 1886, for example, the lynching of Frederico Villarosa attracted the ire of the Italian government, as well as provoked fear within Italian American enclaves. The lynching of Italian immigrants in the American South provides a unique avenue through which to explore the Italian American perception of race and African Americans. By 1920, World War I government-sponsored Americanization programs, as well as the anti-radical, anti-immigrant Red Scare, influenced Italian Americans in numerous ways. With the newfound emergence of national, and American, identities, Italian Americans internalized American racial categories and came to increasingly identify themselves as white.

The most extensively used source for this study will be the Italian language press in New York City. The principal papers are *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, *Cristoforo Colombo*, *Eco d'Italia*, *L'Araldo Italiano*, *Il Proletario*, and *La Questione Sociale*. As a primary source newspapers of course have some limitations. To what degree do newspapers reflect the ideas and values of a broad population, as opposed to the owners, editors, and journalists who wrote in those papers? In others words do newspapers reflect only the ideas and opinions of the privileged and give any analysis only a "top-down" approach?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to learn much about who the journalists for these immigrant papers were, at least with regard to the mainstream press. On the other hand,

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the editors and journalists of the Italian American radical press, such as Edmondo Rossoni and G.M. Serrati from Northern Italy; and Arturo Giovannitti, Camillo Cianfarra, and Carlo Tresca from Southern Italy, were more easily recognizable.

The overwhelming majority of articles in the papers, especially in *Il Progresso*, which was the most extensively mined source, were unsigned. So, it is clear that these articles represent, not the opinions of individual journalists but the overall approach that editors or owners wanted to give to their papers.

In the case of *Il Progresso* its owner Carlo Barsotti was a Tuscan from Lucca who emigrated to the United States in the early 1870s. He made his initial fortune by exploiting his fellow immigrants through his business operations as a classic *padrone* placing immigrants mainly in construction jobs. He also owned a saloon and a number of boarding houses in New York's Little Italy. Barsotti founded *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* in 1880 as a vehicle to promote himself both inside the ethnic community and to forge for himself the role of power broker and mediator between the Italian American community and wider American society. Barsotti and his fellow mainstream press publishers tended to be decidedly conservative and at times reactionary in their policies.[7] However, as subsequent chapters will reveal, the Italian language mainstream press in New York, especially *Il Progresso*, would incorporate a discussion of race relations in the United States more progressive and enlightened in its view than that of the radical press. The evidence suggests that regarding journalistic autonomy, most of the daily operations

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[7] George Pozzetta, *The Italians of New York City, 1890-1914*, PhD Dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1971, 234-43.

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of *Il Progresso*, as well as its editorial positions, were left to its editors, chief among them Adolfo Rossi. It would be Rossi, for instance, who in 1882 turned *Il Progresso* into a mass circulation newspaper.

One way, indeed perhaps the only way to address audience reactions to the press was through the letters to the editor. Throughout the narrative these letters have been utilized in order to give voice to the "voice-less." The reactions of Italian Americans to events such as lynching, expressed through letters to *Il Progresso*, for instance, shed light on how categories of civilization and race were perceived in the Italian American mind.

The question of editorial policy and of letters to the editor both speak to what at first glance appears to be the largely elitist nature of the Italian American press. However, our knowledge of circulation and distribution suggests an alternative. Contrary to what most people think, illiteracy among Italian immigrants in period 1890-1920 was not as severe as was once thought. If regions such as Sicily and Calabria had an illiteracy rate of more than 80% at the turn of the century, immigrants from those regions to the United States had an illiteracy rate of 46%. In other words, more than half of all Italian immigrants could read. Even so, however, this stands in marked contrast to Jewish immigrants whose illiteracy rate was only 26%.

Upon realization that roughly half the population of Italian immigrants were literate, the role of the press as a critical source becomes more apparent. Immigrant newspapers were ubiquitous within the Italian communities and served as a potent source of information for first generation immigrants. For example, between 1884 and 1920 there was a proliferation of Italian language newspapers throughout the United States, and

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especially in New York City—there were 98 Italian language newspapers in existence in 1920, a net increase of 91 from 1884 when there were 7. However, in the interim, 267 additional newspapers were published and circulated for various periods of time. This is in contrast to 95 Yiddish newspapers covering the same period.[8]

These papers were widely circulated within the immigrant communities. In 1918, there were roughly 1,000,000 Italians living in New York City in comparison to 1,500,000 Jews. The total circulation for the Italian language press in New York City has been estimated at 345,000 compared to 532,000 for the Jewish press. These figures work out to roughly the same circulation ratio for both groups: 1 paper for every 2.8 Jews and 1 paper for every 2.9 Italians. In essence, distribution and circulation figures maintain the importance of the immigrant press as a vital organ in the daily lives of first generation Italians. Writing about Italians in 1905 three American authors underscored and expanded this point:

> Their education by contact and observation goes on irresistibly, and the extent of their enlightenment through newspapers and books is not ordinarily realized. Italians who can read are commonly fond

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8 See Table XVI in Robert E. Park, *The Immigrant Press and Its Control* (Patterson Smith, New Jersey: 1971), 313.

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> of reading and those who have not learned to read will listen eagerly to any reading they can understand. The number and circulation of the Italian newspapers in this country show the rising appreciation of the news of the day on the part of the newcomers unable as yet to read the papers printed in English. Yet the stated number of copies printed by any Italian publisher is far below the actual circulation, for the copies pass from hand to hand and reach a number of readers far in excess of the subscribers or buyers. The practice of reading aloud from a paper to a circle of acquaintances eager to hear the news or miscellany or editorial appeals or advertisements vastly expands also the nominal range of these mediums.[9]

Keep in mind also, that a large portion of the Italian language press was radical in ideology. For instance, in 1932 the mainstream press in New York City comprised 66% of Italian language circulation, as opposed to the 34% which was radical.

With a circulation of roughly 90,000 in 1920, Il Progresso's reach into the Italian immigrant community should be multiplied at least five-fold. Although historians cannot substitute editorial positions for the "voice" of Italian Americans en masse, it can be argued that if progressive opinions on race, for example, were such anathema to their readership, the paper would not have consistently ran them. These points, along with the widespread circulation and readership of these newspapers, and the vital role they performed, provide a critical window through which historians of this period may peer into the daily lives and minds of Italian immigrants.

Mining unexplored primary documents, including archival sources from Italy and especially the mainstream Italian language press, this dissertation will differ from recent

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[9] See Eliot Lord, John J.D. Trenor, and Samuel J. Barrows, *The Italian in America* (B.F. Buck, New York: 1905), 245-246 as quoted in Philip V. Cannistraro, "Italian Immigrant Literacy: A Reappraisal," Unpublished Paper 2002.

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works by presenting a more complex understanding of how socially constructed racial categories mutate and change.[10] In essence, this work will be the first study to re-interpret early Italian American history through the lens of race from the point of view of both its European origins and its American transformation.

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The older literature on Italian American immigration offers virtually no insight into the subject of Italians American perceptions of African Americans and race during this period.[11] One of the ways this topic has been approached, albeit indirectly and superficially, has been by examining the "relationship" between Italian Americans and African Americans. Richard Gambino's *Blood of My Blood*, written during the upsurge in ethnic revivalism in the late 1960s and early 1970s, reflects the theories of sociologist Edward Banfield. Using the framework of amoral familism—the notion that Italian

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[10] See David A. J. Richards, *Italian American: The Racializing of an Ethnic Identity* (New York University Press, New York: 1999). Much of Richards work is premised upon the acceptance of "amoral familism" and older theories expressed by Richard Gambino and Edward Banfield.

[11] Among the older standard texts on Italian American history, the issue of race, as it pertains to Italian immigrants and African Americans is largely absent from the narrative. See for example Robert Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of Our Times* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge:1924); Giovanni E.Schiavo, *Italian-American History* Vol. 1 (Vigo Press, New York:1947); Alexander DeConde, *Half Bitter, Half Sweet* (Charles Scribner & Sons, New York: 1971); Amfitheatrof, *The Children of Columbus*; Luciano J. Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello, *The Italian Americans* (Twayne Publishers, New York :1980). For a more recent attempt at understanding the relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans, see Dan Ashyk, Fred L. Gardaphe, & Anthony Julian Tamburri, eds., *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration between Two Communities, Selected Essays from the 30th Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association*, (AIHA, Staten Island, NY:1999).

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immigrants cared for and trusted only those within their extended kin network—Gambino held that Italian Americans lived within and inculcated in their children a strict familial code whereby they were indifferent to everyone and everything outside the family. This family based value system persisted from generation to generation and was only threatened by those outside this kin network who possessed a "diametrically opposed" value system.[12]

Following the Civil Rights Movement and Great Society programs, Gambino wrote amidst what many contemporary observers saw as a white ethnic backlash. Gambino's belief was that African Americans and Italian Americans were just too culturally different not to view each other as a threat. The differences were evident in the types of music each group preferred, as well as physical manifestations such as body language and posture. Gambino asserted that there was no doubt that racism played a role in the relationship between the two groups. Coming from two different worlds, the worlds of Southern Italy and West Africa, the relationship was in many ways biologically and historically pre-determined.[13]

Building upon Gambino's argument was an article by Arnold Shankman in 1978, "The Image of the Italian in the Afro-American Press, 1886-1936." Shankman examined selected African American newspapers and concluded that during times of economic competition Italian immigrants and African Americans had few peaceful encounters.

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[12]Edward Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (The Free Press, New York: 1958); Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood* (Anchor Books, New York:1975).

[13]Gambino, 330.

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Shankman argues that tenuous relations were a result of the encroachment of Italian immigrants into what had hitherto been considered Africa American occupations, such as barbers and waiters in the North and plantation workers in the South. When economic conditions were more stable, the two groups, although not necessarily hostile, barely tolerated each other. Shankman maintains that his study confirms Gambino's assertion that "traditionally Blacks and Italians have never fully appreciated one another's problems or heritage."[14]

Examining Italian immigrant experiences in the American South, George Cunningham and Jean Scarpaci focused on the influx of Southern Italians into Louisiana and their impact upon the Southern racial system during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.[15] Both Cunningham and Scarpaci illuminate how Southern Italians were recruited to "replace" Black labor primarily on sugar plantations in Louisiana. Yet the Italians themselves were described as "non-white" by white Americans and these immigrants further complicated their ambiguous racial status by performing the type of labor that had been relegated solely to African Americans. Cunningham and Scarpaci detail how Southern Italian immigrants ignored, whether consciously or inadvertently, the

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[14]Arnold Shankman, "The Image of the Italian in the Afro-American Press,1886-1936," *Italian Americana*, 4 (1978): 45; Shankman, *Ambivalent Friends: Afro-Americans View the Immigrant* (Greenwood Press, CT: 1982).

[15]George E.Cunningham, "The Italian, A Hindrance to White Solidarity, 1890-1898," *The Journal of Negro History* (July 1965), 22-36; See Jean Scarpaci's, *Italian Immigration in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes, 1880-1910* (Arno Press, New York:1980) and "A Tale of Selective Accommodation: Sicilians and Native Whites in Louisiana," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 5 (1997), 37-50.

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racial codes of conduct and how this made them easy targets for the type of vigilante violence and lynching usually reserved for African Americans. Although both authors argue that these immigrants would eventually conform to prevailing American racial codes, they recognize the "in-between" status accorded to Italian immigrants at the time.

This status as "in-between" white and Black served as the embarkation point for the recent work that deals with immigrants and the question of whiteness. Whiteness studies are grounded on the premise that the racial "other" in American history embraces categories in addition to Black. What these works attempt to accomplish, in general, is to recover, or uncover, a racial identity to whiteness that belies the traditional assumption that being "white" means racial transparency. In the words of Coco Fusco, an activist and writer, "racial identities are not only Black, Latino, Asian, Native American, and so on; they are also white. To ignore white ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it."[16]

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[16]Quoted in David W.Stowe, "Uncolored People: The Rise of Whiteness Studies," *Lingua Franca* (September/October 1996), 70. The literature on "whiteness" is extensive and growing. For some benchmark works see David R.Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Towards an Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (Verso, London:1994); Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth Century America* (Verso, London:1990); Theodore W.Allen, *The Invention of the White Race, Volume: Racial Oppression and Social Control* (Verso, London:1994); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft* (Oxford, London:1993); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (Routledge, New York:1995); Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis:1993); Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (University of California Press, Berkeley:1996); Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism and History* (Verso, London:1992); Ian F.Haney Lopez, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York University Press, New York:1996); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Harvard University

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It is within the rubric of "whiteness" studies that I will ask the more pertinent questions regarding the vicissitudes of Italian American racial consciousness. David Roediger, in his seminal work *The Wages of Whiteness*, demonstrates how Irish immigrant workers, threatened by their lack of control in a rapidly developing antebellum economy, constructed a white identity by contrasting themselves against free Blacks as well as those held in slavery. By fashioning this identity, Irish immigrants transcended their initial racial ambiguity and joined the white American majority.

It is important not to present "whiteness" as monolithic or static, but rather, as a fluid, historically malleable construct. In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Matthew Frye Jacobson contends that the privilege of being white in various forms has been a constant since colonial times, but that whiteness itself has been subject to many changes throughout American history. He proposes to map these changes by examining how whiteness was fractured into a hierarchy of scientifically and socio-politically determined white "races" during the period of mass immigration in the mid to late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Stating that American immigration scholarship is guilty of conflating race and color, Jacobson argues that contemporaries did not see "ethnicity" when discussing official categories such as Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Mediterraneans, Hebrews, Slavs, Alpines, and Nordics, but rather distinct "races" ranked according to their perceived proximity to whiteness. Therefore, an immigrant might be considered white, yet at the same time be perceived as racially distinct from other whites.

Press, Massachusetts:1998).

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Complicating the simple "white-black" dichotomy of some whiteness studies, Jacobson cautions that to "miss the fluidity of race itself in the process of becoming Caucasian is to reify a monolithic whiteness, and, further, to cordon that whiteness off from other racial groupings along lines that are silently presumed to be more genuine."[17]

Prevalent in the literature on immigration and whiteness is the notion of "racial inbetweeness."[18] Southern and Eastern European immigrants entering the United States at the turn of the century were rarely depicted by their new hosts as "white;" rather they were perceived to occupy a racial status somewhere inbetween white and black. What Roediger and Barrett refer to as the "confusion of inbetweeness" characterized how these immigrants perceived their place in the American racial system. In other words, the process was not a clean, linear path towards the attainment of whiteness, but an uneven struggle whereby immigrants would simultaneously embrace whiteness, reject it, and many times remain indifferent to it. According to Roediger and Barrett, "to assume that new immigrants as a mass clearly saw their identity with non-whites or clearly fastened

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[17]Jacobson, 6-7.

[18]For work that focuses upon the "inbetweeness" of European immigrants see the above mentioned articles by Roediger & Barrett, Cunningham, and Scarpaci. See also Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990," *American Quarterly* 44 (1992), 313-347; John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925* 2d ed. (Atheneum, New Brunswick:1963), esp.169; Ernesto Milani, "Marchigiani and Veneti on Sunny Side Plantation," *Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America* ed. Rudolph Vecoli (American Italian Historical Association, Staten Island:1987), 18-30; Rudolph Vecoli, "Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?" *Italian Americana*, 13, no.2 (1995), 149-161.

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on their differences is to miss" this confusion.[19]

Writing in particular about Southern Italian immigrants in East Harlem, Robert Orsi builds upon the inbetweeness of Italians and their effort to establish a border between themselves and what they perceived as the "darker other." Orsi's work deftly presents the various degrees of perception that undergird racial othering—between us and them, white and black, Protestant and Catholic, American and foreign. Familiar with racial classifications that branded them an inferior race, Italian immigrants in the United States would attempt to shed the mark of the "turk," or "color," that Northern Italians had stamped on them. Again, this process was fraught with confusion and required an intimate struggle against the uncertainties and realities of "inbetweeness." According to Orsi, "the immigrants were transformed first into 'Italians' in this country, initially in the perceptions of others who were hostile to them and their dark skins; then they had to become 'Americans' at a time when this identity itself had become the site of bitter, often racially charged conflict."[20]

This work does not posit a view of race relations along a simplistic white/black dichotomy. Whiteness studies and the notion of inbetweeness have recently come under scrutiny for failing to capture historical nuances and portraying whiteness as a monolithic category of analysis.[21] In *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in*

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[19]Roediger & Barrett, 29.

[20]Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries," 318.

[21] For a critique of whiteness studies see, Eric Arnesen, "Whiteness and the Historians' Imagination," International Labor and Working Class History 60 (Fall 2001),

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Texas Cotton Culture, one of Neil Foley's central concerns is how poor white farmers in Texas, or "white trash," "ruptured the convention that maintained whiteness as an unmarked and normative racial identity."[22] Foley examines the different meanings ascribed to whiteness by populations informed by diverse racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and cultural backgrounds, and demonstrates how categories such as *Anglo*, or *Mexican*, inadequately represent the heterogeneous culture of central Texas. In this dissertation, terms such as *white* and *Italian* will not be used with the intention of conflating diverse European cultural groups, but rather as a means to explore the operative point of reference for Italian Americans and race in the United States. Their status as white in flux, Italian immigrants did not fear comparisons to other European immigrants, but those that cast them as black or non-white. As Foley maintains in defense of his usage of terms such as *Anglo*: "Despite the contradictions inherent in the nomenclature . . . . the terms Anglo/white, black, and Mexican . . . . conform to the ways in which these diverse groups constructed their own identities as distinct from members of the other group. However imaginary the homogeneity of these communities might be, the boundaries separating the groups were real enough."[23]

Further, the racial category describing southern Italians as inbetween white and black is not the invention of contemporary historians, but rather nomenclature of the

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[22] Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Culture* (University of California Press, Berkeley: 1997), 8.

[23] Foley, 9.

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period. Newspaper headlines explicitly described Italians as a group "between white and black," never failing to portray these "swarthy sons of the sunny south" as a distinct race.[24] Complicating the whiteness literature, this analysis will show the racial configuration of American society was more nuanced than a simple black-white dichotomy. By examining Italian American reactions to Native Americans and Asian Americans, this dissertation demonstrates how southern Italian racial consciousness was informed by a range of myriad peoples and categories.

The traditional view of Italian American assimilation is the story of a people that from generation to generation slowly and deliberately became more American by turning its back on its Italian heritage. This story needs to be re-written within the context of race, whiteness, and inbetweeness. In doing so, a more complex history of Italian American assimilation can be told—a history that will register the complicated process whereby southern Italian immigrants, furnished with a multi-layered racial consciousness, wrestled with their own racial ambiguity in their new country. The process would continue, as subsequent American born generations would struggle to distance themselves, not necessarily from their Italian heritage, but from a past that connected southern Italian with "blackness." The tragedy of Yusef Hawkins was not a product of Italian origins but of the Italian American experience. Becoming American was intimately connected with becoming white.

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[24] *New York Sun*, August 4, 1899; *New York Times*, November 28, 1892.

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Chapter 1

"Europe Ends at Naples": The Creation of a Racial Consciousness Within Southern Italians

In response to a lynching in Vicksburg, Mississippi in 1886 the local *Commercial Herald* declared "the lynching of those who commit rape, is the best possible protection from the horrible crime."[1] To white Southerners, violence in the form of lynching was used to uphold the kind of justice that mobs felt the courts would not deliver, especially since proving guilt regarding rape was deemed difficult. Moreover, even in cases where guilt was proven, lynching served as the antidote to punishments interpreted as too lenient. Extra-legal violence, or "popular justice," as many southerners described it, also served another purpose: According to the *Commercial Herald*, "It is the refinement of cruelty and humiliation to put upon the witness stand the victim of the outrage, and perhaps members of the family to prove the horrible details and face the badgering of the lawyers for the defense. Any respectable family would shrink from such an ordeal, and no respectable community should exact it."[2]

Arguments about the preservation of southern female virtue provided the standard

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[1] *The Commercial Herald*, March 30,1886.

[2] Ibid. Twenty-five years later the notion that a community had little choice but to lynch in order to maintain the justice and honor of the community was posited by a professor of psychology in an article entitled "The Psychology of Lynching," originally printed in *International Monthly Magazine*, 1901; an article about the study appeared in "La Psicologia del Linciaggio." G.DeMarco. *L'Araldo Italiano*. July 25,1901.

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defense for lynching. Expressing obvious approval of the Vicksburg lynching, the *Commercial Herald* warned: "God help the community, where there are not willing arms of brave men, to protect the females. Southern sentiment has always [been] sound on this point, and the standard of virtue is higher in the Southern States than anywhere else in the world."[3] Between 1880 and 1930, 3,220 African Americans and 723 whites were lynched in Southern states, with the greatest number occurring in the Deep South and Texas.

But while standard in tone and content for incidences of mob violence in the South, the article in the *Commercial Herald* was not written in response to the lynching of an African American—the victim was an Italian immigrant from Palermo, Sicily. Described by the local papers as the first lynching to have occurred in Vicksburg in fifty years, Francesco Valoto, known also as Frederico Villarosa in Vicksburg, was arrested and eventually lynched for the crime of criminally assaulting the young daughter of a prominent townsman.[4]

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Maintaining a grocery store--selling fruit and candy--near Wilson's drug store on Jackson Road, Villarosa's immigrant experience in America was probably not unlike that of other southern Italians who had settled in the American South. However, unlike many

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[3]*The Commercial Herald*, March 30,1886.

[4]Unidentified newspaper, Archivio storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Rome, (hereafter ASMAE) Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro, 1886-1887." See also, Consular Agent Piazza to Italian Consul in New York, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro, 1886-1887;" *The Vicksburg Evening Post*, March 26,1886.

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of his countrymen, Villarosa was subjected to a distinct form of American racial violence that would cost him his life and leave the Italian immigrant colony in Mississippi--as well as the rest of the South—deeply alarmed.

According to the *Vicksburg Evening Post*, on the afternoon of Thursday, March 25, 1886, around 2:00 pm. Fred Villarosa enticed into his store the young 10-year-old daughter of William Groome, the Vicksburg Postmaster. Other accounts claim that the young girl was seized up on the sidewalk and forcibly carried into the store. The report details how Villarosa attempted to muffle the cries of the young girl by holding the child's sunbonnet over her mouth as he proceeded to pull her into the back room. However, hearing cries for help, "a young colored boy" employed nearby ran into the store to find the child in Villarosa's arms struggling to get loose. Upon the boy's entrance, Villarosa released the girl, offering her one-dollar if she promised not to reveal what had just happened. Rejecting his offer, she returned home and retold the story to her parents in "an agony of tears and sobs." Letting the law take its course, William Groome, the girl's father, issued an affidavit against Villarosa, who was arrested on his premises and eventually brought before a Grand Jury and indicted.[5]

As news of the incident spread throughout the city, popular outrage grew. According to the local newspaper, "It is difficult to form an exact estimate of public sentiment, but it is safe to say that a large number of people were in favor of lynching

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[5]The information surrounding the background of the incident appears in *The Vicksburg Evening Post*, March 27,1886; Letter from Adelino Tirelli, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di

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him."[6] Due to the foresight of the local sheriff, who attempted to move Villarosa from the prison in Vicksburg to the town of Jackson under the dark of night, the mob, unaware of Villarosa's whereabouts, would have to wait to extract vengeance. However, unable to place the Italian on the first train out of Vicksburg, Villarosa and the two deputies were met at the station by about seven townspeople who escorted the prisoner back to the jail. A crowd of curious onlookers, as well as those who would take part in the lynching, began to assemble outside the prison. Fearing the worst, Sheriff Worrell telegraphed the governor and received a reply ordering local military companies to guard the jail. After another effort by the sheriff to remove the prisoner, a failed attempt that left Villarosa with a broken leg as he jumped over a wall to avoid being shot by the mob, the crowd eventually dispersed. For Villarosa, this was only the beginning of the nightmare.

Between 12:00 and 1:00 a.m. Mr. McFerrall, the night watchman at the county jail, was called to the gate of the prison by an unknown person who claimed to be delivering a prisoner. Suspicious of the request, McFerrall informed the man that prisoners would not be admitted at such an hour of the night and that all inquiries should be made to the keeper of the work-house nearby. After telling McFerrall that the workhouse keeper would not admit the prisoner without an order, the night watchman proceeded to pass one to the unknown man through the peep hole. McFerrall's doubts as to the sincerity of the man's requests were confirmed as he heard the murmur of many

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stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[6]*The Vicksburg Evening Post*, March 27,1886.

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voices outside. The plan of entering the jail "peacefully" foiled, the lynch mob resorted to force. Appropriating a horse rack--a large wooden beam with iron rods stuck in it at right angles--for use as a battering ram, the mob, variously estimated at from fifty to two-hundred people and masked with handkerchiefs, broke past the front gate. As they approached the inner door, McFerrall, seeing resistance was useless, opened the door before it could be broken down. Twelve or so men, masked and carrying pistols, entered the area of the jail where Villarosa was housed. The leader of the mob demanded the keys to Villarosa's cell.

Henry Jackson, an African American charged with murder who was placed with Villarosa to attend to the broken leg he had sustained, recounted that Villarosa appeared alarmed when the mob began pounding the gate. Exclaiming, "what is that," he then sat silently, fixated attentively and anxiously to the ruckus going on around him. When the mob reached his cell and unlocked the door, Villarosa shouted in horror "Oh Lordy !"[7] Slipping a rope around his neck, the crowd lifted him up and continued through the front gate to the northeast corner of the jail. Ironically, Villarosa was hung on the limb of a mulberry tree that stood in front of Massino's fruit stand--surely a compatriot of Villarosa's. Whether or not the mob meant purposely to send a symbolic message to the town's other Italian immigrants is not known, but it must have had this effect. Members of the Italian community took down Villarosa's limp body and buried him in a lot

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[7]Unidentified newspaper clipping, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso Italo-Americano"), 1886-1887.

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belonging to the "Italians of Vicksburg in the City Cemetery."[8] After consideration of the evidence before them, a jury summoned by the coroner rendered its report--to no one's great surprise, their verdict declared that the "deceased came to his death by hanging by a mob of unknown parties."[9]

Villarosa's execution by extra-legal means prompted the Italian government to investigate the matter. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as the Italian ambassador in the United States, were incredulous over feigned efforts to seek out the guilty parties involved. In a letter to the United States Secretary of State, the Attorney General in Mississippi lamented the impossibility of identifying the men because they were wearing masks: "It is utterly impossible for the officers of the law to fasten the guilt upon any one of them." Further disturbing was the State Attorney General's assertion that "Villarosa was treated precisely as he would have been, in all human probability, had he been a native born citizen of the State."[10] In a letter to the Italian Ambassador in Washington, D.C., the Italian Foreign Minister expressed regret that "in such a civilized country an

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[8]Letter from Consular Agent Piazza to Consul General, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[9]Information pertaining to the Villarosa lynching is in *The Vicksburg Evening Post*, March 26,1886, March 27,1886; *The Commercial Herald*, March 29,1886, March 30,1886; Quote cited in Unidentified newspaper clipping, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[10]Letter from Attorney General of Mississippi to U.S. Secretary of State, Washington, D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

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Italian could be snatched from justice by a mob." In preparation for a meeting with the United States Secretary of State, he urged the ambassador to use strident language to convey Rome's grave displeasure.[11]

New York's *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, the largest circulation Italian American daily newspaper in the United States, questioned whether the rape of the young girl actually occurred: "Villarosa may have kissed the little girl," *Il Progresso* contends, "but he didn't rape her, nor did he even try to rape her and that is certain . . . . In addition, medical reports do not sustain reports of rape." The paper proposed that it was more the "respect that the girl's family possessed within the community," than the facts that sentenced Villarosa to his inglorious death. *Il Progresso* argued "the [Villarosa] store was always open--it was small with neighbors on both sides--none of which would have a reason to cover for his actions." Regrettably it added, "Poor Villarosa is in heaven and we only have the report of the girl who came home crying with allegations of rape."[12]

Whether Villarosa was guilty or innocent is, of course, not the point. The Italian community in Vicksburg saw Villarosa's lynching as simply one instance in a consistent pattern of anti-Italian bias. In a letter written to the Italian Consul in New York, Adelino Tirelli, a shoemaker, claimed that proof as to Villarosa's innocence was available to the

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[11]Letter from the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rome, to Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[12]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, April 9,1886.

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authorities and declared that Villarosa's lynching was a crime directed at Italians in general.[13] These accusations were supported by *Il Progresso's* observation that within the community Italian immigrants were subjected to base and revolting insults, as well as a "shameless and wicked crusade against Italians" perpetrated by the local paper, the *Daily Commercial Herald.* To strengthen its point, the article cited another instance in which Italian workers were jeered and taunted as they passed through town on their way to work on the railroads in Alabama.[14]

What is notable, however, is that while Italian Americans recognized lynching as a crime perpetrated predominantly upon African Americans,[15] some viewed the bias they themselves experienced as a reaction to their racial status. The fact that Villarosa was lynched, with all its symbolic meaning, served to trouble an immigrant community already unsure of where it stood within the American racial dynamic. Many in Vicksburg's Italian colony felt as if their very presence in that town enraged the native population. Villarosa's lynching could not have been a starker example of how this rage

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[13]Letter from Adelino Tirelli to Italian Consul, New York, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[14]Newspaper clipping from *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[15]In a letter from the Italian Ambassador to the Foreign Minister in Rome, there is a statement pointing out that lynchings, such as the one that took Villarosa's life, were unfortunately also applied to Blacks. See Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C. to Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rome, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

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could materialize into violence. Yet to people in the Italian colony like Adelino Tirelli, as well as newspapers such as *Il Progresso*,[16] it appeared that the hatred emanating from native white Southerners had everything to do with their being Italian. Italian American concern in Mississippi was evident a year after the lynching. Forming a mutual aid society called Margherita di Savoy, after the queen of Italy, Adelini Tirelli informed the Italian consul "this society was not formed for the usual reasons you create a mutual aid society, rather it was created to protect our lives, our honor, and our interests."[17]

The foremost scholar on lynching, W.Fitzhugh Brundage, claims that by the end of the nineteenth century "lynching had become primarily a southern and racial phenomenon."[18] Although over 85 % of lynching victims in the South were African Americans, as southern Italian immigration to the region increased the number of Italians being lynched also grew. The fact that southern Italian immigrants occupied a unique and indeterminate racial classification left them more susceptible to forms of contemporary racial violence than other European immigrants in America.

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[16]See article in *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, "Ancora del linciaggio dell'italiano a Vicksburg, Miss.," in ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[17]Letter from Adelino Tirelli to Italian Consul, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 59, fascicolo 18, "Linciaggio di un italiano accusato di stupro (Allegato: due numeri del "Progresso italo-americano"), 1886-1887.

[18]Brundage quoted in Colin A.Palmer, *Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America, Volume II: 1863-1965*, (Harcourt Brace, New York:1998), 109-110.

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What is known as the shift from the "old immigration" to the "new immigration" is illustrated most vividly by the immigration statistics for the years 1882 and 1907. In 1882, 648,000 European immigrants emigrated to the United States, the overwhelming majority (87 %) hailing from northern and Western Europe. Only roughly 13 % came from eastern and southern Europe. The largest source was from the German empire--northern Europeans who at the time, along with the once unwelcome Irish decades earlier, were considered acceptable, assimilable, northern stock. These ethnic groups would come to dominate the urban cities, especially in the northeast. However, by 1907, the origin, as well as the perception, of the immigrant would change markedly. During the course of that year, immigrants from eastern and southern Europe comprised roughly 81 % (or 972,000) of European immigration to the United States. The number from Italy alone amounted to 286,000; this was more than three times the total of new immigrants for the year 1882.[19] The migration from Italy comprised a large portion of the total immigration during the period from 1880 through 1924--the year that restrictive immigration laws were passed effectively shutting off the flow of southern and eastern European immigrants. Between 1900 and 1910 more than 2 million--overwhelmingly, southern Italians--immigrated into the United States; by 1930, another 2.5 had million arrived. The influx of Italian immigrants was so staggering that by World War I Italy had been losing population to emigration at a rate of more than a half million a year.

The Italian immigration experience, in terms of the nature of the agricultural

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[19]Kessner, 7.

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background of the southern Italian peasant, as well as their relation to the central government, mirrors in many ways the experience of the Irish immigrants in the 1840s and 1850s. Immigrating for mostly economic reasons, the Irish fled the terrible potato blight that beset their country in the middle of the nineteenth century. This, along with oppressive British rule that left most of these people poverty stricken, was the trigger mechanism that set them to flee. Similar to southern Italians later in the century, few, if any, arrived in America with any real marketable skills or money, many did not speak English, and most would flock to the urban northeastern cities, where American reception was hardly positive.

In his seminal work *The Wages of Whiteness*,[20] David Roediger argues that white Americans compared Irish immigrants with African Americans based upon similar living and working conditions For example, both groups lived side by side in northern urban slums, both performed labor that white Americans shied away from, and both had suffered oppression at home. As Roediger postulated, "shared oppression need not generate solidarity but neither must it necessarily breed contempt of one oppressed group for the other."[21] Given these similarities, one may ponder, as did Frederick Douglass, why Irish immigrants and Black Americans eventually came to see each other as rivals rather than allies. To answer this question Roediger examines how and why categories of race are constructed in the United States by illustrating the transformation of Irish

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[20]Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*.

[21]Ibid., 134.

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immigrants into "white" workers. By distancing themselves from African Americans, Irish Americans would soon treasure the privileges of their whiteness as entitling them both to political rights and jobs.[22]

In terms of racial consciousness, the southern Italian immigration experience can be viewed in much the same manner. Two major differences, however, between southern Italians and Irish immigrants were that Italians had developed some degree of racial consciousness at home, and the extent to which southern Italians were compared to African Americans. Unlike previous immigrants who had been compared to the African American only in the social and economic arena, the southern Italian was perceived to be linked biologically as well. Indeed, much would be made of the "dark" complexion of the southern Italian--or their olive skin.

Although, the majority of Italian immigrants would settle in northern, urban cities, there were a large number that settled below the Mason Dixon line. The decision to immigrate southward was influenced by employment opportunities generated by the perceived labor shortage created from the abolition of slavery. The many African Americans leaving their former plantations and moving to southern urban areas or other states such as Kansas fueled this fear. Fearing a chronic labor scarcity, plantation owners initially tried recruiting Chinese and Scandinavian immigrants. However, unsatisfied with the results, they turned their attention towards southern European immigrants. Concern was aroused in state governments, professional and business organizations, and

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[22]Ibid., 136.

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railroad agents. All of these entities, together with the Italian government, collaborated in an effort to attract southern Italian immigrants to work on sugar and cotton plantations in Louisiana, Arkansas, and Mississippi. Another motivating factor behind this recruitment drive was white Southerner's perception, motivated by a virulent racist ideology, that African American laborers were inadequate. A plethora of "scientific" studies comparing Italian and Black agricultural laborers consistently praised the Italian workers for their industry, thrift, and reliability. According to Jean Scarpaci, the "conviction of white planters regarding the inadequacy of Negro workers served as a powerful force in the promotion of Italian immigration."[23]

Louisiana was the Southern state that attracted the most Italian immigrants--the majority of which [97%] were from central and northern Sicily. Between the years of 1880 and 1920 64,222 southern Italians arrived--twice the combined amount in bordering states such as Texas (22,802), Mississippi (5,508) and Arkansas (3,908). Many of the

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[23]Upon migrating to Southern states Italian immigrants also labored in the lumber industry, railroad industry, and truck farming. See Jean Ann Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes: Recruitment, Labor Conditions, and Community Relations, 1880-1910*, PhD Dissertation, Rutgers University, 1972, later published under same title by Arno Press, New York: 1980), xvi. On the efforts to promote immigration see: Rowland T. Berthoff, "Southern Attitudes Toward Immigration, 1865-1914," *Journal of Southern History*, XVII (1951), 328-360; Bert James Loewenberg, "Efforts of the South to Encourage Immigration, 1865-1900," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXIII (1934), 363-85; Henry Marshall Booker, "Efforts of the South to Attract Immigrants, 1860-1900," (unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1965); Alfred Holt Stone, "The Italian Cotton Grower: The Negro's Problem," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, IV (1905), 42-47; Emily Fogg Meade, "Italian Immigration into the South," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, IV (1905), 217-23; Lee J. Langley, "Italians in the Cotton Fields," *Southern Farm Magazine*, XII (1904).

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Sicilian immigrants settled in the city of New Orleans, establishing themselves most forcefully in the import and retail aspects of the fruit and vegetable business. Others labored as barbers, shoemakers, and in the service trades. Although Italians had settled in New Orleans since the 1850's, the Italian immigrant community in New Orleans would dramatically increase to 30,000 inhabitants, or 11 % of the city's 245,000 population from 1870 to 1890.[24] The state of Louisiana also experienced a large influx of Sicilians as many Sicilian immigrants migrated to the sugar parishes of Louisiana during the sugar harvest—or *zuccarata*. At these times of the year the region attracted a seasonal migration, not only externally but internally from New York, Chicago, St.Louis, and even nearby New Orleans, that placed the floating population anywhere from 30,000 to 80,000, according to various estimates. Italian immigrants who remained in the state stood a better chance of rising out of the wage earning class and into the entrepreneurial level of sugar cane or truck farmer, saloon keeper, or retail store owner, than their countrymen in more urban, industrial areas.[25]

In southern states Italian immigrants were thrust into the uniquely American racial system of "separate but equal." Although Italians were not exposed to the peculiarity of American racial hierarchies before their arrival, it is not accurate to assume that their inexperience with American style racism meant they were devoid of any consciousness

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[24]Marco Rimanelli and Sheryl L.Postman, eds., *The 1891 New Orleans Lynching and U.S.-Italian Relations*, vol.2, Studies in Southern and Italian-American Culture, (New York: Peter Lang,1992) 1.

[25]Jean Ann Scarpaci, "A Tale of Selective Accommodation: Sicilians and Native Whites in Louisiana" *The Journal of Ethnic Studies*, 5:3, 1977, 37-50.

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regarding Africans. How Italians perceived African Americans in the United States was filtered through a racial lens formed and shaped in southern Italy. A useful paradigm to buttress this point is James Grossman's work on the great African American migration to Northern cities after World War I. Grossman argues that how Southern Blacks viewed urban, industrial life would be filtered through a race sensitive lens that was particular to Southern African American culture. It was, for instance, their deeply ingrained distrust of whites, along with other factors such as union exclusion, that partially hampered Black union organizing.[26] This same model should be applied when examining the racial consciousness of the Italian immigrant. In other words, how did these immigrants view the American racial hierarchy of white over black?

Considered an inferior race by both northern Italians and northern Europeans in general, southern Italians entered this country with a multi-level racial consciousness. One level of consciousness pertains to inculcated feelings of inferiority that resulted from northern Italian depictions that they were backward barbarians or savages; the second has to do with southern Italian perception of the African race. These perceptions manifested themselves in the political, social and cultural attitudes of southern Italians. The Italian press' coverage of Italy's colonial expansion into Africa during the 1880s and 1890s, the image of the Moor in Italian folklore and culture, and the presence of hundreds of black Madonnas in many southern Italian shrines and churches, will be examined in an effort to

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[26]James R.Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1989), Chapter 8.

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probe and uncover the pre-immigration racial awareness of southern Italians.[27]

This awareness is further complicated by distinctions Italians made in their conception of "Africa." For many Italians, "Africans" were perceived as Mediterranean peoples—or north African—and had a veneer of "civilization." When Italians in the late nineteenth century referred to Africa, "turk," or "moor," they were really referring to the Mediterranean environment where there had been interaction between North Africa, the Middle East, and southern Europe for millennia. Depictions of the Moors in contemporary puppet theater would buttress this characterization. Consequently, a distinction was made when Italian and Italian American newspapers used terms such as "cannibal" or "savage" to describe a sub-Saharan Africa much more unfamiliar to them except through nineteenth century travel and exploration narratives.

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The history of modern Italy is replete with discussions about the "Southern Question."[28] The lower half of the Italian peninsula, or *Mezzogiorno*, is marked by a

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[27]Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Northeastern University Press, Boston: 1993).

[28]In the past two decades significant shifts have taken place in the interpretations of southern Italy. Scholarship has begun to move away from interpretations that attempt to explain the "peculiarities" and "idiosyncrasies" of southern Italy through a comparison with Northern Italy. This approach, known as *meridionalismo*, evolved shortly after Italian unification as intellectuals strove to explain the reasons behind the South's apparent underdevelopment in relation to the North. These interpretations were extremely influential in the subsequent historiography on what became known as the "southern problem." For example, the contrast between the Northern and Southern economies was explored through the notion of "dualism"--the idea that two completely separate economies existed side by side within the same country. However, during the 1980s new scholarship began to challenge the basic premises of *meridionalismo*.

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history of economic exploitation, political oppression, and cultural discrimination. Centuries-old problems such as uneven social arrangements and poverty level existence for most of the agrarian proletariat, the bulk of the population in the South, left much of the region in a proto-feudal existence. In the aftermath of national unification in 1861, hopes for a rejuvenated Southern Italy were short lived. Although Italian political unification did not create the problems within the Mezzogiorno, it failed to address them, and in the years after 1861 disparities between the two regions actually increased. The failure of the northern-dominated Italian government to include the South in public works programs, transportation improvements, educational reforms, and badly needed irrigation projects, served to relegate the South to a continued existence of poverty. Further exacerbating the situation, the central government increased taxes on the Southern peasantry compelling them to bear a disproportionate share of the public debt.

It was during this period that the notion of Italian dualism originated and a series of powerful images would be stamped in the consciousness of national public opinion.

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asserting instead that constantly interpreting the South through an implicit comparison with the North distorted the realities of the Mezzogiorno. The older scholarship, revisionists argued, positioned the South as a static, backward society completely separated from any of the positive features of Italian history. In *Latifundium: Moral Economy and Material Life in a European Periphery* (University of Michigan Press, Michigan: 1996), Marta Petrucewicz challenges this notion by focusing on the economic, social and moral functioning of a Calabrian *latifondo*. It ahistorically implied that the South was a homogeneous region made up of various provinces that possessed similar characteristics. In essence, the revisionists warn of the dangers of trying to analyze the South within the "old" historiographical framework of a "southern problem" set forth by their predecessors. See Jonathan Morris, "Challenging *Meridionalismo*: Constructing a New History for Southern Italy," in *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*, Robert Lumley & Jonathan Morris, eds., (University of Exeter Press, London: 1997), 1-19.

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For instance, images of rural brigands hanging from scaffolds intertwined with stories of barbarous actions exacerbated the image of a demonic Mezzogiorno. The South was seen as a primitive land where the climate induced laziness, a lack of responsibility, and allowed nature to rule over civilization. This "paradise inhabited by devils" led its inhabitants to live an immoral and uncivilized existence. The perception of the Mezzogiorno as a land forgotten by history was buoyed with powerful racial connotations. In 1806 Crueze de Lesser observed that "Europe ends at Naples and ends badly. Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa." One of Camillo Cavour's envoys in the South in 1860 wrote: "What barbarism! Some Italy! This is Africa: the bedouin are the flower of civilized virtue compared to these peasants."29 According to Gabriella Gribaudi, the "South was considered a frontier dividing civilized Europe from countries populated by savages from Africa."[30]

The Mezzogiorno became much more than a geographical area inheriting metaphorical attributes that refer to a powerful imaginary and mythical identity. It had assumed a history that was based upon negation with the more "civilized" and "enlightened" North. The South was constructed as an "Other" to northern Italy and the

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29 John Dickie, "Stereotypes of the Italian South,1860-1900," in Lumley & Morris, 122. See also John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (St.Martin's Press, New York:1999); Vito Teti, ed., *La razza maladetta: origini del pregiudizio antimeriodionali* (Manifestolibri, Rome: 1993); Claudia Petraccone, *Le due civilta'* (Laterza, Rome-Bari:2000).

[30]Gabriella Gribaudi, "Images of the South: The *Mezzogiorno* as seen by Insiders and Outsiders," in Lumley & Morris, 87.

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values synonymous with the North. This identity as the "Other," has served, in large part, to exclude the Mezzogiorno from much that is admired in Italy's history. Indeed, as nineteenth century Italy sought the roots of a national identity in the history of medieval city-states and the Renaissance and its entire attendant cultural and political attributes, it would exclude the South from this history and the models to which it appealed.[31] According to John Dickie, "The South was one of Italy's most important banks of images of Otherness. The barbarous, the primitive, the violent, the irrational, the feminine, the African: these and other values, negatively connoted, were repeatedly located in the Mezzogiorno as foils to definitions of Italy."[32]

As the gap between the North and South widened, questions abounded pertaining to the character of the people from the Mezzogiorno. Northerners perceived the inability of Southern rural Italians to keep pace with an industrializing north as a biological flaw, rather than a function of a government meeting the needs of only half its people. This racial exploration was "scientifically validated" by the developing theories of the positivist school of biological racism. In the late nineteenth century writers such as Alfredo Niceforo and Cesare Lombroso served to exaggerate, as well as spread, existing stereotypes about Southern biological traits. Lombroso, a noted Italian criminologist, pinpointed biological, rather than socio-economic, reasons behind the proliferation of

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[31]Gabriella Gribaudi, "Images of the South" in David Forgacs & Robert Lumley, eds., *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, New York: 1996), 74.

[32]Dickie, "Stereotypes of the Italian South," 119.

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crime in the Southern regions. Alfredo Niceforo, an Italian academic, argued that the moral and social structure of the South revealed an inferior civilization that was reminiscent of a primitive and quasi-barbarian age. Niceforo processed civilization and barbarity through a gendered lens that served to clarify and re-enforce the notion of southern Italian barbarism. He described southerners as a *popolo donna*--a feminine people-- and northerners as *popolo uomini*--masculine peoples. Constructing a relationship between femininity and barbarity versus masculinity and civilization,[33] these "scientific" conclusions only served to reinforce what northern Italians had come to accept: southern Italians were an inferior breed--savages, barbarians, with characteristics that biologically differentiated them from progressive, civilized northern Italians.[34]

The effects of these conclusions reached well beyond Italian academic circles and seeped into the popular consciousness serving to fuel, as well as reinforce, existing stereotypes about the racial traits of southern Italians. It was Niceforo who would later be cited by the United States Immigration Commission in its effort to validate the distinction between the civilizations of northern and southern Italy.[35] According to Gribaudi,

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[33]The connections between late nineteenth century constructions of masculinity and civilization are explored in Gail Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization: A Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago:1995).

[34]See Gribaudi, "Images of the South," in Lumley and Morris, 95; Dickie, "Stereotypes of the Italian South," 114-121; See also Mary Gibson, "Biology or Environment? Race and Southern 'Deviancy' in the Writings of Italian Criminologists, 1880-1920," in Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's 'Southern Question: 'Orientalism in One Country* (Oxford, New York: 1998).

[35]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, vol.5, 82.

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"passages of literature, casual conversations, and both popular and academic discussions on the Mezzogiorno, in the media emphasize the similarities" between southern Italians and "savagery."[36]

Popular contemporary periodicals, such as the *Illustrazione Italiana* provide a useful example of the sort of generalizations current in the broader culture. The most popular illustrated magazine between 1880 and 1900, the *Illustrazione Italiana* constructed through its images of the "picturesque" South a model sensibility: "if the *Illustrazione Italiana* was to sell to a national market, then it had to tap into and cultivate national sentiment; it had to make stereotypes of Italy as it competed for readers . . . . representations of the South as picturesque had a central place in that project."[37] These depictions of the South as picturesque were constructed according to conceptions of what categories governed emerging middle-class views. Using these standards as the norm, "the picturesque names, aestheticizes and patronizingly celebrates the South's anomalous position between Italy and the Orient, between the world of civilized progress and the spheres of either rusticity or barbarism."[38] The South was a region that was to be defined by others rather than those living the history. Although the popular depictions thread a fine line between the quaint and the weird, the picturesquely Italian and the grotesquely Oriental, the South still occupied a realm of "otherness" which set it apart from northern

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[36]Gribaudi, "Images of the South," in Lumley and Morris, 95.

[37]Dickey, "Stereotypes of the Italian South," 131.

[38]Ibid., 135.

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Italy. An excerpt from *Illustrazione Italiana* demonstrates how the picturesque was used to draw a racial distinction between the two regions. An article dealing with labor disturbances in Sicily mentions a town crier's announcement to the people: "You'll see! A real muezzin calling the faithful to prayer from the top of his mosque! Yes, because here the Saracen stamp is at its clearest and most obvious. In the fields where I interviewed many peasants I found only types with the most unmistakable African origin. My, how much strange intelligence there is in those muddled brains."[39]

In order to examine the development of southern Italian racial consciousness towards people of color, it is important to understand how southern Italians understood and filtered such negative characterizations of themselves, their society, and their culture. In doing so, a series of questions arise. How did this projected identity of racial inferiority affect the construction of southern racial self-identities and did it facilitate the development of a separate consciousness among southern Italians as a distinct people with their own identity, history and interests? Faced with negative American assumptions about them, did Southern Italians internalize a pre-existing sense of inferiority once in the United States? Did they push away from comparisons to African culture, or all things Black, or did they feel a community of interests with other marginalized peoples? In short, in what ways did these experiences affect their view of racism and African Americans in the United States?[40]

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[39] Ibid., 135.

[40]For more on theoretical discussions of identity formation see Colin A.Palmer.

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In the late nineteenth century, Italy, following the example of other European states, embarked on a path of imperialist venture—described as a kind of 'race patriotism'—into Africa. Surrounding and informing this quest was a missionary zeal—a belief that not only would European society save Africa from itself and bring European 'civilization,' but the conquest of Africa would be the saving grace for their own countries. For the recently unified Italian nation, this belief was reinforced by questions of prestige, diplomacy, and overpopulation. For Italians, the "scramble for Africa"[41] served to awaken political and popular consciousness towards people of color.

Only recently unified, the Kingdom of Italy, like Germany, came to the imperial table later than France and England. Quarrels with France over colonial possessions, trading agreements, and control of the Western Mediterranean sparked Italian imperial thirst. The French occupation of Tunis in 1881, in particular, was a heavy blow to Italy--both in prestige and national interests--especially since more than 9000 Italians settlers lived there as compared with only 200 French. In an attempt to protect her interests and prevent isolation in world power politics, Italy signed a defensive alliance with Germany and Austria-Hungary known as the Triple Alliance. Although the alliance provided some sense of security, it did not give Italians a sense of the pride and glory that many felt a

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Passageways: An Interpretive History of Black America, Volume 1:1619-1863 (Harcourt Brace & Co., New York: 1998). See especially Ch.7, "Constructing Identities," 95.

[41]For a more thorough discussion of the European quest for colonies in Africa in the late nineteenth century see Thomas Pakenham, *The Scramble for Africa: White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent From 1876 to 1912* (Avon Books, New York: 1991).

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hunger for.

It does not appear to be entirely accidental that in the years when southern Italian politicians were in power [e.g. 1881-85, 1887-1900], there was more emphasis on looking southward toward North Africa. In fact some of the greatest enthusiasm was to be found in the South, where the pervasiveness of agrarian misery and overpopulation made the idea of emigration to foreign territories under the Italian flag attractive.[42] According to Martin Clark, "Italian colonialism was not founded on any need to secure raw material supplies . . . . it was the agricultural crisis of the mid-1880s and the need to export social problems that underlay it, together with a frustrated desire for self-assertion."[43] Italian prestige and honor, as well as an expectation of socio-economic gain, were linked in an inverse manner to the forced subjugation of Africans. This ideology, not uncommon for European nations at the time, as well as the United States, affected how Italians, and especially southern Italians, envisioned hierarchical human relations.

By the late 1890s Italy had become embroiled in a hugely expensive colonial war in Africa. Scrambling to carve a niche for themselves on the African continent, initially Italy's interest lay on the Red Sea, around the port of Massawa, which she occupied in 1885. By 1890 Italy had established a protectorate over Ethiopia (Abyssinia) and pushed further inland, linking up their Red Sea possessions of Massawa and Assab to form Eritrea. They also began the conquest of Somalia which formally became an Italian

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[42]Christopher Seton-Watson. *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism, 1870-1925* (Methuen & Co. Ltd., London: 1967), 118.

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colony in 1905. Disputes between Empereor Menelik and Italy over Italian claims of a protectorate over Ethiopia, as well as campaigns to prevent the French from gaining a foothold in the region, ended in a major military defeat for the Italians at Adowa in 1896 at the hands of Menelik's army, made up of indigenous soldiers. Although the Italian military had already experienced a crushing colonial defeat at Dogali in 1887, the most "humiliating" military setback from the Italian perspective was the Battle of Adowa in March 1896. During this battle, 5,000 Italians had been killed and 2,000 taken prisoner. It was the first time that an African army had defeated a European colonial nation with such devastating results.

For a nation attempting to claim colonial glory and honor by subduing Africans, the defeat at Adowa was a crushing blow to Italian prestige and resulted among other things in the disgraceful exit of Prime Minister Francesco Crispi. When news of the defeat reached Italy the country rose in open protest as tens of thousands of workers marched into the Piazza del Duomo in Milan to demonstrate against Crispi, shouting "Viva Menelik," Abbasso Crispi," and "Via dall'Africa." According to Umberto Levra, a "preinsurrectional tension exploded in spontaneous demonstrations in the piazzas of Italy."[44]

Although Italy retained the territories of Eritrea and Somalia, the defeat at Adowa remained imbedded in the collective popular consciousness of Italians. Mass-produced

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[43]Martin Clark, *Modern Italy 1871-1982* (Longman, New York: 1984), 47.

[44]Umberto Levra, *Il colpo di stato della borghesia: La crisi politica di fine secolo in Italia, 1896-1900* (Feltrinelli, Milan: 1975), 7-13.

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pamphlets containing songs and poems were sold and circulated widely throughout the country in the aftermath of Adowa. One particular pamphlet, in an effort to avenge the defeat psychologically, drew attention to the period before Adowa as if to deny the experience of disaster. Entitled, "Vittoria Italiana in Africa" [Italian Victory in Africa], the epic poem describes the honor and valor of Italian soldiers as they battled the "wicked and nasty" African soldiers. The image of the African is that of the barbarian savage--one that resorts to military subterfuge that "civilized" nations such as Italy would not employ in battle. Produced for mass propaganda, these kinds of pamphlets created a negative image of the African that seeped into the popular mind.[45] Coupled with the image of the "inferior" African, the thirst for revenge and redemption resulting from Adowa would bear fruit under the nationalistic foreign policies of Benito Mussolini in the twentieth century.[46]

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Intertwined with perceptions in the political and diplomatic arena, are the folk-cultural representations of southern Italians in regard to the "darker other." The English

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[45]Pamphlet, "Storia della Vittoria Italiana in Africa e disfatta di Ras Mangascia," (Tipografia Adriano Salani, Viale Militare, Firenze:1910). The pamphlet contained illustrations that influenced the popular image of Africans in the Italian mind. Appearing to be an African leader, the illustration is of a man wearing a tunic of some sort, with braided hair held in place with a metal rod, and protruding teeth apparently reflecting what Africans were believed to possess.

[46]For a fuller discussion of Italian colonialism into Africa in the late nineteenth century, see Clark, 46-48; 99-101; Seton-Watson, 98-182; Angelo Del Boca, *Gli Italiani in Africa Orientale: Dall' Unita` alla Marcia su Roma* (Mondadori, Roma: 1976).

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writer Norman Douglas, a long-time resident of Italy, observed in 1915, that when speaking of figs, wine, snakes, stones or even olives, southern Italians often described them as either white or black, prompting the remark that "few things are more worthy of investigation than the colour-sense of these people."[47] Douglas also tells us that the color red was called "turco," signifying the influence of the Turks who monopolized the secrets of dyeing colors. However, to people of the Mezzogiorno "turco" or Turk also meant black "in accordance with the tradition that the Turks, the Saracens, were a black race."[48] Although Douglas' tone is condescendingly patronizing, his observations are illuminating in providing an example of how southern Italians attached meaning to the language of color. Frequently categorizing objects within a narrow spectrum of black or white, how would southern Italians interpret and filter other images of blackness within their culture?

Sicilian puppet theater, or *L'opera dei Pupi*, was one of the favorite—perhaps the principal—recreational amusements in popular Sicilian culture.[49] Every town reputedly had its own marionette theater, which always drew large crowds and was open every day in the year except Good Friday. Small puppets based upon the characters in the legends illustrated in the theaters were bought in toyshops all over Italy. In 1931 Paolo Milano wrote that after 800 years in Sicily there still flourished over 50 theaters in Sicily where

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[47]Norman Douglas, *Old Calabria* (Gentry Books, London: 1915), 51.

[48]Ibid., 52.

[49]Isabel Emerson, "The Sicilian Marionettes," *Contemporary Review*, 137, March 1930, 369.

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"puppet paladins" did battle nightly—the most famous of which was Emanuele Macri's theatre at Acireale, on the coast below Mount Etna.[50] Although it flourished elsewhere in southern Italy, it was in Sicily that this form of folk puppetry was at the summit of its evolution.[51] Many of the plays reproduced were based on the legends of Charlemagne, the cycle which inspired Italy's classic epic *Orlando Furioso*. The plots focused on the metrical romances of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*, the *Orlando Furioso* of Ariosto, Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*, Pulci's *Life and Death of the Giant, Morgante Maggiore*. All these tales were related to the struggles between Christianity and Islam to which Sicily's own history is closely linked.

The theaters were usually found in the market place of the poorer districts and were primarily patronized by men and boys. Women rarely frequented the puppet shows. According to Elisabeth Cavazza, the presence of a woman would be a "mark for the wondering stares of the young men and boys who fill the benches and galleries. Not that the plays would offer any offense to feminine modesty; on the contrary, they are always unexceptionable in action and language; but so it is, women are almost never present."[52] It is important to remember, especially where the subject of racial consciousness is

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[50]Paolo Milano [translated by Elena Mitcoff]. "L'Opera dei Pupi in Sicily" *Puppetry*
1934, 58.

[51]Emerson, "The Sicilian Marionettes," 368.

[52]Quoted in Elisabeth Cavazza, "At the Opera di li Pupi" *Atlantic Monthly*, 73, June 1894, 797; See also Madge Anderson. *The Heroes of the Puppet Stage* (Harcourt.Brace & Co., New York: 1923), 231; A.R. Philpott, *Dictionary of Puppetry*

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concerned, that the first waves of southern Italian immigration to the United States in the late 19th century consisted primarily of young men from these poor southern villages. This segment of Italians was the most exposed to the "lessons" of 'l'opera dei pupi' and would continue to see the sketches in Sicilian puppet theaters that were equally popular in New York's Little Italy.

The tales and legends of Sicilian folk puppet theater help in reconstructing popular racial consciousness towards the "darker other."[53] The cultural significance of the theatre, as well as the tales they were based upon, was consequential. According to one contemporary account:

> The boys stop on the street corners to debate the warlike merits of the Paladins. They would cheerfully go without their suppers for a chance to see the fights on the puppet stage. The Sicilian peasants often have sign artists paint scenes from the Charlemagne legends in bright red and green and canary yellow, on their queer little two-wheeled carts, and they know the story of the Paladins almost by heart . . . strolling

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(Macdonald & Co., London: 1969), 236.

[53]Contemporary observer Elisabeth Cavazza felt that studying this form of folk culture could unlock a treasury of indications as to the character of the Sicilians as well as the popular problems they faced. Cavazza quotes Dr.Giuseppe Pitre, whose studies on the Sicilian people she claims are unsurpassed for verity, patience, and affectionate insight. Dr.Pitre asserted that: puppet theatre and the chivalric tales therein "has an historic reason in the spirit of the southern population of Italy, and is kept alive by reasons at once psychological and ethnical, and wholly in relation to the nature of our people...they must bear, as they do, in themselves the elements which suit the vivid fantasy, the imagination of the Sicilian populace." Pitre further asserts that the passion for medieval chivalry--the eternal struggle between Christians and infidels--dovetailed with a religious fact. Honoring traditions such as one in which the virgin patron of Palermo is seen as a direct descendant of Charlemagne, Pitre concludes that "it is no wonder that the Sicilian people, tenacious in its beliefs as in its traditions should . . . speak with such enthusiasm of Rinaldo Orlando, and remember with something like national pride." See Cavazza, "At the opera di li Pupi" 802.

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> story tellers mount the tables in the parks, and, flourishing their wooden swords, declaim the old legends in the grandiloquent language of the poets. These wandering bards and the puppet plays provide the literary amusements of Sicily.[54]

The story line usually follows the basic narrative of good versus evil, in this case a battle between Christians and Muslims, the latter usually referred to as "Saracens," "Moors," or "Turks." Indeed, in southern Italy, the vernacular word 'Christian' referred to a person of good standing--a gentleman of integrity. Conversely, a person of questionable morals was referred to as a Turk.[55] In this case the heroic Orlando and his knights do battle against their pagan enemy warriors, "the followers of Agramant, the Saracen Emperor of Africa."

The racial composition of the puppets and the symbols they represented were stridently clear to the audience, who do not find it difficult to distinguish between the Christians and Pagans when they engaged in battle. Madge Anderson describes the racial dynamic of the puppet show this way: "the noble Christian knights are fair in colour and are dressed in shining armour and elegant velvet and silks and lace, while the hated Paynims have swarthy faces and are shabbily attired and their armour is allowed to become tarnished."[56] For example, characters such as the villain Ganelon, or Gan, possessed a dark facial complexion eliciting the comment from one young son of an

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[54]Anderson, 234.

[55]Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (Yale University Press, Connecticut: 1985).

[56]Anderson, 232.

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Italian puppet showman that "we never wash his face because he is a bad man."[57] The characters of Ruggero and his sister Marphisa, converts to the Christian faith, were fair and elegantly dressed, but possessed physical traits particular to the Moors such as dark hair and eyes. This cross-mixing of racial signifiers was deeply illustrative and symbolic, making these two characters conspicuous contrasted with the Moors by their faces and with the Paladins by their dark hair.

Aside from the phenotypic differences, the sharp racial contrast between the chivalric Christian knights of Orlando and the "infidel pagan" Moors manifests itself in other conventions, such as tonal variation in the voices of the puppets, attitudes toward women, and symbolic bodily transformations. The voices of the Paladins were described as possessing "virile notes . . . the deep voice of Charlemagne . . . appeared compounded of equal parts of majesty and laryngitis." This was contrasted with the "clucking discords of the Turks."[58] In one story the King of Circassy, a "pagan," was ashamed that a female warrior had bested him. According to a contemporary observer, these feelings of despair were due to the fact that "pagans" did not have the same respect for women warriors as the Christian knights--again, a difference that could be interpreted as reflective of a southern Italian belief that "christians," as opposed to the darker other, were a more "civilized" society—in the sense that they respected women almost as equals. In one particular Sicilian theatre, after the conclusion of an epic play the audience

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[57]Ibid., 232.

[58]Cavazza, 801.

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was treated to a ballet featuring a Moor dressed in a turban. After a process of transformation where the puppets limbs and head were removed in a series of gyrating convulsions, an interesting transformation took place. Shaking and shuddering, the lifeless body rose up in the air above the stage and came down again in the "form of a sort of caldron, from which issued four little red devils." The symbolic significance of the Moor transformed into objects viewed as inherently evil—red devils—could not be any more overstated and probably any more expected by the audience.[59]

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Southern Italian culture is replete with anomalies and contradictions which render any easy conclusion about racial consciousness a difficult one. One phenomenon adding to this complexity is the presence and worship of black statues of the Madonna, the venerated icon of Christianity, throughout southern Italy. Lucia Chavola Birnbaum, who has written extensively on this subject, argues that Black madonnas "are believed to nurture all life, all the different peoples of the earth, and all the seasons of life: birth, maturity, death and regeneration."[60]

Although black woman divinities are venerated, not only in Italy, but in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas, Italy is particularly interesting as a location of study due to it being an historical link connecting these areas with Europe. Further, although the country is the center of world Catholicism, widely shared southern Italian

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[59]Ibid., 802.

[60]Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Northeastern University Press, Boston: 1993), 4.

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beliefs embodied in Black madonnas differ drastically, and heretically, from church doctrine.[61] Quite simply, Birnbaum is telling a story that considers black madonnas a metaphor for the beliefs of the vernacular, submerged cultures of Italy.[62] Speculation as to the meaning and implications of the worship of Black madonnas in southern Italy offers a glimpse into how southern Italian culture perceived images of the "darker other" and of itself.

Black madonnas are found throughout such southern Italian cities as Rome, Naples, Avellino, and Foggia. They are identified by phrases such as "the dark Madonna" (as Shulamite woman), the gray Madonna, "the whitened Mamma Schiavone" or "great black slave mother," the very black l'Incoronata, and the hidden black Madonna. Birnbaum notes that the difference in popular perception of these black images and how the church perceives them was never more evident than her experiences in trying to locate these statues. In many cases the Church had attempted to conceal or alter the statue and its appearance--sometimes even whitening its black surface. In other cases the church denied that the statue was a black Madonna at all. One sacristan in the *duomo* of Siena, asserted that the black Madonna there was not black but simply dirty. Other clergy told stories of fires, or candle smoke, that had burned and darkened the statues that had previously been white.[63]

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[61]Ibid.

[62]Ibid., 11.

[63]Birnbaum, 13-14.

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One effort to explain why southern Italian peasant populations venerated black madonnas, roots this passion in centuries-old popular resistance to the patriarchal Catholic Church. In this vein, the black madonnas are themselves "Christian borrowings from earlier pagan art forms that depicted Ceres, Demeter, Diana, Isis, Cybele, Artemis, or Rhea as black, the color characteristic of goddesses of the earth's fertility."[64] According to archaeologist Marija Gimbutas, ties between the fertile soil and the earth mother--as springers of life--are evident not only in the artifacts but also in the "continuous veneration of black madonnas to this day."[65] It appears that the longstanding European tradition of associating "blackness" with evil is complicated by the southern Italian reverence for black symbols. Unlike David Roediger's analysis of Irish racial consciousness in Ireland, it is possible to make the argument that before immigrating, southern Italians had already developed a consciousness of race towards people of African descent that would inform their outlook in the United States.[66] The fervency of the worship of black madonnas inspired great popular pilgrimages and was believed to have had miraculous powers. Although Church authorities had forbidden worship of black madonnas in some regions of southern Italy, worshipers made pilgrimages to the shrines and climbed the steps of the church on their knees, licking each step as they

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[64]Leonard W.Moss & Stephen C. Cappannari, "In Quest of the Black Virgin: She is Black Because She is Black," in *Mother Worship: Themes and Variations*, James J.Preston, ed., (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1982), 65.

[65]Birnbaum, 24.

[66]See Roediger, *Wages of Whiteness*, 137-138.

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ascended. According to Moss and Cappannari, the blackness of the image is directly equated to its power. "The attitude of the pilgrim approaches not reverence but worship."[67]

The connection between this cosmological power and black images did not disappear upon the arrival of southern Italians in the United States. The presence of black madonnas in Italian enclaves in the United States, suggests that this tradition remained powerful to southern Italians living abroad.[68] In 1913 a chapel of the Black Madonna was constructed on East 13th Street in New York City. Within the chapel was a replica of the Black Madonna of Tindari of Sicily, now known as the New York Black Madonna, which was credited with possessing all the same miracle-working powers of the Sicilian original. The chapel's construction was borne out of a tradition of festivals since 1905 celebrated by Sicilian immigrants from the town of Patti, near the ancient town of Tindari. It is the black virgin of Tindari that has been described as one of the two most revered Sicilian images of the Madonna.[69] According to I.J.Isola, writing in 1936, the chapel "is not under the supervision of the ecclesiastical authorities, and [is] maintained by liberal contributions of faithful Sicilians, who in an effort to revive the customs of

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[67]Moss & Capponnari, 67.

[68]I. J. Isola, *The Italians of New York*, (working copy, 1936), WPA files, Series 50/Rolls # 259 & 260, Municipal Archives, NY. In this work there is a section discussing the Black Madonna of Tindari which was housed in St.Mary's of Tindari Church in downtown Manhattan.

[69]Moss & Capponnari, 61.

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their native land, hold a day of festivity once a year."[70]

One of many WPA writers commissioned during the 1930s to document ethnic groups within New York City, Isola deemed the chapel of the Black Madonna of Tindari the "most mysterious" of the three Italian chapels on East 13th Street. One cannot help but infer that Isola's surprise stemmed from the color of the statue, along with the popular veneration of it, more than anything else.[71] According to Isola, the original Madonna, who was hidden in the mountains of Tindari to save it from Saracen invasions in the ninth century AD, "was black, not because it lay smoldering in flames, but as homage to the biblical description 'Nigra sum, sed formosa'--'I am black, but beautiful.'"[72] In the words of Gimbutas, it is "the blackness" of these madonnas that "still evokes profound and meaningful images and associations for devotees."[73] Frederick Douglass, the African American abolitionist and ex-slave, was deeply impressed by southern Italians' reverence for Black spiritual images. Travelling through Rome and Naples as part of a European tour in 1886, Douglass was curiously struck and somewhat comforted by the facile manner in which black religious symbols were worshipped:

> I had some curiosity in seeing devout people going up to the black statue of St.Peter—I was glad to find him black; I have no prejudice against his color—and kissing the old fellow's big toe, one side of which has been nearly worn away by these devout and

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[70]Isola, *Italians of New York*

[71]Ibid.

[72]Ibid.

[73]Quoted in Birnbaum, 24.

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> tender salutes of which it has been the cold subject . . . . It is doubtless a great comfort to these people, after all, to have kissed the great toe of the black image of the Apostle Peter . . . . I felt, in looking upon these religious shows in Rome, as the late Benjamin Wade said he felt at a negro camp-meeting, where there was much howling, shouting, and jumping: 'This is nothing to me, but it surely must be something to them.'[74]

Douglass' illuminating observation reveals a great deal about the manner in which cultures attach meaning to symbols and actions that to others appear meaningless. Yet, at the same time, it complicates an already blurry picture of the nature of southern Italian racial consciousness. How did southern Italians react to Northern characterizations that they were a savage, primitive--indeed African--people? What was the effect of the colonial nationalistic policies of the Italian government on southern Italians? Did these expansionist experiences engender, or re-enforce, a particular perception of Africans? Or, in the southern Italian mind, did imperialist policies remind them of their own colonial-like existence to a 'civilizing' oppressor? What sort of meaning did people derive from puppet theater with its heroes of Christianity in perpetual battles of good—white—versus evil—the darker Moor? If these plays were representative of a cultural morality linked to contemporary European constructions depicting good and evil as white and black, how does the ubiquitous presence of venerated black Madonnas complicate this theory?

While the answers to these questions are important, the most pressing point to

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[74]Frederick Douglass, *Autobiographies: Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, and American Slave; My Bondage and My Freedom; Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (The Library of America, New York: 1994), 1004.

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underscore is that southern Italians seem not to have had a universal racial consciousness. The effects of these factors on southern Italian racial consciousness are not clear. Rather, a more constructive and fruitful approach would be to propose that these factors demonstrate an awareness—a consciousness—of Africans within the minds of southern Italians. Unlike Irish immigrants before them, to be identified as black had a meaning to peasants and artisans from the *Mezzogiorno*—a meaning that would mutate and alter upon their arrival in America. For my purposes this is the crucial point. The manner in which Italian immigrants ordered and adapted their traditional cultural mores onto newly encountered American experiences and values would produce a uniquely Italian American *weltanschauung*. The category of racial consciousness is part of that worldview. An already formed and embedded consciousness towards race had been constructed before immigration and would serve as the filter through which southern Italians strained and interpreted American racial mores. The process by which immigrant racial consciousness mutated upon their arrival was not linear, but rather characterized by a series of hierarchical racial distinctions borne out of previous associations and real experience in the United States.

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Chapter 2

"Between White Men and Negroes": The American and African American Perception of Southern Italian Immigrants Through the Lens of Italian Lynchings

"You shoot my goat, you better shoot me," an exasperated Francesco Difatta informed Dr. J.F. Hodge, a well respected coroner in the town of Tallulah, Louisiana. In the summer of 1899 an ostensible dispute over the roaming of a goat sparked a melee that would eventually end in the brutal murder and lynching of five Italian immigrants. The goat, owned by three Italian shopkeepers, Francesco, Carlo, and Giacomo Difatta, had been the subject of strife due to the goat's penchant for roaming upon Hodge's property. Hodge took the matter into his own hands by firing several shots and killing the DiFatta goat. The resulting argument between the DiFatta brothers and Hodge left Carlo with a gunshot wound and Hodge near death.

As word of the killing spread--as it turned out Hodge survived his wounds--a lynch mob comprised of almost the entire population of the town, as well as several hundred men from the surrounding county, coalesced to find the "Italian killers." The sheriff stormed to Francesco's store, arresting him and 2 friends of the family, Rosario Fiducia and John Cirano. All three were taken to jail. At the same time a mob found Carlo and Giacomo who were both taken to a nearby slaughter post that butchers used to skin and dress cattle. The post was a simple structure--two posts planted in the ground with a beam across the top. Two pulleys, with a rope in each, were bolted to the

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crosspiece. It was a structure that had been used before against African Americans for just this purpose. With the mob in a frenzy Carlo and Giacomo, were raised to their death. Thirsty for more blood, the mob proceeded to the jail where they seized Francesco, Rosario, and John, and hung them on a nearby cottonwood tree in the jailyard--the same tree utilized three times in the past four years to lynch African Americans. Right before the rope was pulled sending his body into the air, Francesco Difatta reputedly shouted to the crowd "I liva here sixa years. I knowa you all--you alla my friends."[75]

Riddled with bullets the bodies of the five Italians would be left hanging all night. In the next few days residents of Tallulah rationalized the murder by stating the Italians had been troublemakers since they arrived in North Louisiana and probably conspired to kill Dr.Hodge. With reference to the 1891 murder of New Orleans chief of police David Hennessey, the *New Orleans Daily States* added: "Every man in that crowd knew all about the mafia and all about the Hennessey [sic] murder. They were determined there should be no repetition of that--they looked on these degenerates as monsters, capable of any infamy and they determined to destroy them root and branch, just as the traveler places his armed heel upon the head of the viper."[76]

The lynching would not be the final act in the Tallulah mob's desire to stamp out the Italian presence in their midst. In addition to the five Italians lynched, there is the

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[75]*The New Orleans Times Democrat*, July 24,1899.

[76]*The New Orleans Daily States*, July 24,1899.

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story of the Difattas' brother-in-law, Giuseppe Defina, who lived in nearby Millikens Bend. According to local newspaper reports, the lynch mob had dispersed after it had completed its task, but Giuseppe Defina told a different story to the Italian Consulate. Defina maintained that he had received a warning that he should leave Millikens Bend and Madison Parish or risk the same fate as the other Italians. The local newspaper account claimed that the lynch mob gave Defina three days to leave town—Defina needed only three hours to purchase a skiff for six dollars and hire Buck Collins, a black man, to pull his son and him to Vicksburg.[77] Defina was informed by a friend named Ward that on the night of the lynching a crowd from Tallulah was headed to Millikens bend to lynch him as well. Ward pleaded with the crowd to spare the Italian's life and having averted the immediate danger was warned that Defina had twenty-four hours to leave the area or suffer the consequences. The next day another friend of Defina, Dr.Ganes, informed the Italian that he learned in Tallulah the deadline had been shortened to two hours. Upon hearing this new information Defina claimed he immediately fled.[78]

Defina took a list—provided by two African American brothers—of the 19 persons who had threatened to lynch him to the Italian Consul. One of the two brothers, Joe Evans, who had worked in Francesco Difatta's store for two years, witnessed the Difatta lynchings and was willing to testify that the people involved in the Millikens

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[77]Edward F.Haas, "Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899," *Journal of North Louisiana Historical Association*, Vol 13, No. 2&3, (Spring/Summer 1982), 50.

[78]Haas, 52.

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Bend affair were same people who carried out the lynching in Tallulah. The list named Mr.Rogers as the "leader who was to go to Millikens Bend to hang Joe Delfino [sic] and his son;" Mr.Coleman, "who was the one that climbed the tree and held the rope;" Fred Johnson as "the one that carried the rope;" and Anden Severe as the one who "furnished the ropes." Evans also mentioned that two other African Americans, brothers Paul and Bill Bruse, could also testify against the lynchers. Defina was instructed by the Italian Consul to return to Vicksburg in order to obtain a signed affidavit of Evans' testimony, but he discovered that no notary public would take down the their statement. Defina's experience with Southern racial mores was further heightened when he learned that one of the Evans brothers had been murdered because he had spoken too much about the lynching.[79]

Later in March 1900 the District Attorney of the 19th Judicial District in Louisiana completed his investigation into the lynching at Tallulah and informed the Governor of Louisiana "all the witnesses mentioned in your communication, whose attendance could be compelled, were summoned and testified on oath that they knew nothing of the affair." He added, somewhat exasperated, that "this is the third Grand Jury which has thoroughly investigated this matter and each investigation has been thorough and has resulted in failure to implicate anyone."[80] Upon learning of the results of the

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[79]Italian Consul in New Orleans to Ambassador, January 13,1900, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901."

[80]District Attorney to Governor, Louisiana, March 29,1900, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-

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investigation, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was "disgusted" with what they believed was a "whitewashing of the incident by the U.S. government."[81] In a highly ironic and harsh statement to the U.S. State Department in May, the Italian Ambassador refused to dignify the D.A.'s report by discussing it. Rather, the ambassador demonstrated his dimay by claiming that the report which originated from a "state belonging to a great and highly civilized republic . . . cannot but provoke shock and discouragement on the part of friendly nations like Italy who have had constant and cordial relations with the United States."[82]

Although on January 29,1901 President William McKinley recommended that Congress provide indemnities to the Italian government for the crimes committed against Italian subjects, Italy was not satisfied.[83] The Italian government had maintained throughout the ordeal that its fervency in seeking justice had nothing to do with pecuniary motives. As the Foreign Minister stated in April 1900, their involvement "is not for

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1901."

[81]Italian Ambassador to Dept. of State, Washington,D.C., April 24,1900, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901."

[82]Italian Ambassador to Dept. of State, Washington, D.C., May 6,1900, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901."

[83]The United States government paid an indemnity in the amount of $25,000 to the Italian government to be divided among the families of those killed in Tallulah. See Haas, "Guns, Goats, and Italians: The Tallulah Lynching of 1899." 54; See also unidentified newspaper articles, "Indemnity for Tallulah Victims," "The Lynching of Italians," in ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901."

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economic gain but for the heinous crime committed not only against Italian subjects, but against the interests and laws of civilization."[84] Although this payment officially brought closure to the investigation of the Tallulah lynching of 1899, it did not serve to ameliorate conditions for Italians in the South. Perceived by white Americans as a race of "non-white" immigrants, lynch mobs would victimize southern Italians frequently--in fact, soon after the Tallulah indemnity was paid in 1901, two more Italian immigrants were lynched in Irwin, Mississippi. The perceived racial characteristics of southern Italian immigrants would play the primary role in the sort of racial violence they would experience in the American South at the hands of white mobs. "Leading citizens" of Tallulah defended the lynching of five Italians in 1899—a lynching rumored to have occurred due to the easy manner in which the murdered Italian shopkeepers mingled with the African American community—by claiming "they were obliged to take the step they did . . . and that to insure white supremacy no other course was possible than the course pursued."[85] One report stated that the people of Tallulah "believe they were justified in the action they took and there is no way of convincing them otherwise. It is the same old story which is ever recurrent . . . the story of the 'maintenance of white supremacy at any cost."[86]

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[84]Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rome to Italian Ambassador, Washington,D.C., April 7,1900, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866, "Linciaggio di Tallulah:bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901."

[85]*The Times-Democrat*, July 24,1899.

[86]*The Daily Picayune*, July 25,1899.

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How white southerners perceived Italians as a race, as well as how they interpreted their economic position and social interaction through the prism of the Jim Crow white supremacist South, served to situate Italian immigrants on a level with African Americans unlike other European immigrants had experienced in the United States. A contemporary newspaper offered its interpretation of the Tallulah lynching by arguing that in the South "the average man will classify the population as whites, dagoes, and negroes. This is the explanation of the lynching of Italians in Louisiana . . . . The unwritten law of the South is that a white man shall not be lynched . . . . The only exception is the Italian, who in this respect has been placed on terms of equality with the Negro."[87]

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In the eyes of native whites, the Italian immigrant in the South was a racial enigma. In many cases recruited to "replace" black labor because of "superior" skills, Italians were looked upon with suspicion because of their apparent racial characteristics. Perceived as non-white, or "inbetween" white and black, Italian immigrants strengthened this perception by their social and economic association with African Americans. It was this non-white status that would "license" white Southerners to deal with southern Italians as they dealt with African Americans. It cannot be stressed enough that lynchings of Italians never came close to reaching the numbers that it did in the African American community. Nevertheless, the brutal reality and symbolic nature of lynching served as a

[87]*The New York Sun*, August 4,1899.

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powerful reminder to all of the entrenched racial hierarchies in the South.[88] An examination of the lynching of Italian immigrants in the South reveals something of how white Americans, African Americans, and Italian immigrants perceived each other—as well as themselves—and sheds light on the inner workings and vicissitudes of American racism.

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American nativism towards "foreigners" did not, of course, originate with the arrival of southern and eastern European immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nativist ideology and thought were prevalent within American culture throughout the course of its history. With respect to European immigrants, nativism was powerful enough to have immediate impacts upon national development especially in the 1790s, the 1850s, between the years 1886 to 1896, and during World War I. It was during these eras that the country was undergoing major national crises--in the 1790s international conflict intensified political division at home; sectional division came to a head in the 1850s; class division in the 1890s; and the shock of war struck the nation in 1917-18. According to John Higham, "in each of the crisis, confidence in the

[88]Rooted in traditions of lawlessness associated with slavery and the strife of Reconstruction, lynchings continued to occur with regularity long after they had become a rarity in other parts of the country. By the late nineteenth century, mob violence associated with lynching had become a distinct symbol of black oppression in the South and a prominent feature of the region's race relations. According to W.Fitzhugh Brundage, "to explain the prevalence of mob violence was to explain much about American attitudes about social order, justice, and race." See *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South*, W. Fitzhugh Brundage, ed., (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill: 1997), 2, 4, 11.

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homogeneity of American culture broke down. In desperate efforts to rebuild national unity, men rallied against the symbols of foreignness that were appropriate to their predicament."[89]

Toward the end of the nineteenth century immigrants arriving in large numbers traced their origins to southern and eastern parts of Europe. Their origins, along with their economic position, language, and religions, differentiated them markedly from those who had come from western or northern Europe. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, Italian, Slavic, and Jewish immigration increased dramatically, with the peasants, laborers, and artisans from these lands living in highly exploitative economic conditions. Historically, this shift from the "old immigration" to the "new immigration" played a distinctive role in the reinvigoration of nativist ideology and thought from the 1890s.[90] The hostility that these newcomers generated stemmed almost wholly of a reaction against their culture and appearance. Within this convention, the Italians were often portrayed as the most degraded of the new immigrants. They were seen as bottom feeders—used to a standard of living lower than any of the other "acceptable" nationalities, illiterate, and prone to violence.[91]

However, unlike John Higham's argument that nativist fervor precipitated racial constructions, Matthew Frye Jacobson contends that the concept of race and perceptions

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[89]John Higham, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism 1860-1925*, Second edition. (Atheneum, New York: 1963), xiii.

[90]Ibid., 65.

[91]Ibid., 66.

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of immigrants in racial terms had been integral to European immigration throughout the history of the United States. In *Whiteness of a Different Color*, Jacobson asserts that the privilege of being white in various forms has been a constant since colonial times, but that whiteness itself has been subject to many changes throughout American history. According to Jacobson, "'Fitness for self government,' a racial attribute whose outer property was whiteness, became encoded in a naturalization law that allowed Europeans' unrestricted immigration and their unhindered (male) civic participation. It is solely because of their race, in other words, that they were permitted entrance."[92] Therefore, the highly racialized ideologies used to describe the "new" immigrants was a shift from "one brand of bedrock racism to another-- from the unquestioned hegemony of a unified race of 'white persons' to a contest over political 'fitness' among a now fragmented, hierarchically arranged series of distinct 'white races.'"[93]

Undergoing massive industrialization and urbanization at the turn of the century, fears abounded within American society over the perceived inability of the "new" immigrants to assimilate. The spectrum of the progressive reaction to immigration included, on the one side, humanitarian responses manifest in the settlement house movement and calls for municipal political reforms, to aggressive forms of coercion and racial nativism.[94] Many American government officials, intellectuals and academics, as

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[92]Jacobson, 42. Higham, *Strangers in the Land*, Ch.6.

[93]Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, 42-43.

[94]Peter D'Agostino, "Craniums, Criminals, and the 'Cursed Race': Italian Anthropology in American Racial Thought," unpublished paper, 2000, 20.

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well as the general population, vehemently questioned their suitability for citizenship and feared their effect on the racial composition of the country. An article published in *The North American Review* warned that "The term 'American wage-earner' is rapidly becoming a misnomer . . . . This transformation in the racial composition of the wage-earners of the country has been brought about by the immigration to the United States during the past thirty years."[95] Implicit within the article is the concept that southern and eastern Europeans could never become 'Americans'--more specifically, white Americans.[96]

It is within this context that the influx of Italian immigrants alarmed many Americans, who saw Italians as racially inferior. The Federal Government intervened in

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[95]W. Jett Lauck, "The Real Significance of Recent Immigration," *The North American Review*, Vol.195, No.2 (February 1912), 201-211. Quote on 204-205.

[96]The concept of race was ubiquitous in Lauck's interpretation of the immigration question. In two articles published within 4 months of each other, Lauck espouses most of the standard reasons for immigration restriction such as the concern for "American" labor; the "mixing of the races," and more importantly the social stigma attached to "native Americans or older immigrant wage-earners who do the same kind of work as southern and eastern Europeans." Lauck contended that the creation of this stigma or "lack of respectability" was an outgrowth of "racial prejudice and has always been operative in our industrial establishments." Therefore, although it is clear that Lauck favored restrictive immigration laws, his concession that racial prejudice played a vital role nevertheless demonstrates the centrality of contemporary constructions of race within the immigration debates. Interestingly, a few months later, Lauck weakly argued, somewhat contradictory given all the 'evidence' he presented to the contrary, that "a temporary restriction of immigration would not imply any racial discrimination or deviation from our traditional policy." Lauck's desire to use the racial factor in proposing restrictive immigration laws only belies its importance as a determining variable in its conception. See W. Jett Lauck, "The Real Significance of Recent Immigration:" Lauck, "The Lesson from Lawrence," *The North American Review*, Vol.195, No. 5 (May 1912), 665-672.

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1907 when the Dillingham Commission on Immigration was appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt to offer Congress a plan to solve, in Roosevelt's words, "this immigration business." The Commission comprised of three Senators, three Representatives, and three Presidential appointees and chaired by Senator William P.Dillingham, who favored immigration restriction, took more than three years and issued forty-one volumes of findings. In 1911 the U.S. Immigration Bureau published their purportedly "objective and scientific" study, concluding that the "new" immigrants--harder to assimilate, prone to crime and disease, less literate--were decidedly less desirable than Northern Europeans. In essence, the Commission had concluded what they had already assumed to be true before their investigation began and reinforced the conventional negative racial view of the "new" immigrants. In particular, the Commission argued that racially the "new immigrants" from southern and eastern Europe were "unlike the British, German, and other peoples who came during the period prior to 1880."[97] The findings aligned the many nationalities of these immigrants into two major groups and proceeded to fit the evidence into a preset conclusion. In the end, they claimed to have "demonstrated" the divergent nature--race--of the old and new immigrants.[98]

Borrowing liberally from theories posited by Italian racial anthropologists such as Cesare Lombroso, Giuseppe Sergi, and Alfredo Nicefero, the debate over immigration

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[97]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, Vol. I, *Abstract of Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington, D.C.: 41 vols, 1911), 14.

[98]Ibid., 14,24. See also Kessner, 24-26.

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restriction in the United States, embodied by the Dillingham Commission's conclusions, was informed to a certain degree by Italian racial thought linking race to southern Italian culture.[99] Both Sergi and Niceforo were used selectively by federal studies classifying immigrants and by proponents of Anglo-Saxon racism, such as the popular progressive sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross.

Giuseppe Sergi's theories on race were built upon the foundation that internal rather than external characteristics, i.e. skin color, should be used to classify humans—the key element being cranium size. In *The Mediterranean Race: A Study of the Origin of European Peoples* (1895), Sergi expounded upon a controversial Afrocentric argument which traced the origin of the populations of Europe to Africa. According to Sergi, this African stock emerged from east Africa and settled in the Mediterranean basin before migrating throughout Europe during the Neolithic period. The stock was actually one species, the Eurafrican, which in modern times had three varieties or races differentiated by geography--African, Mediterranean, and Nordic. Moreover, these three classifications differed in skin color and language, but not in their cranial forms.

Sergi's theories were replete with nationalistic overtones. Himself a Sicilian,

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[99]A variety of works by Lombroso, Sergi, and others writing Italian racialist anthropology was disseminated in the United States early in the 20th century. Lombroso's *Criminal Man* was translated into English in 1911, the same year as his *Crime: Its Causes and Remedies* appeared. In fact, as early as 1895 Lombroso's *The Female Offender* and his articles in American journals drew attention to his school of thought, as well as influenced others such as the English eugenecist's Havelock Ellis' popular work, *The Criminal* in 1890. Giuseppe Sergi's *The Mediterranean Race* was published in English in 1901 and read by President Theodore Roosevelt, as well as cited by the Dillingham Commission and nativists in general. See D'Agostino, "Craniums, Criminals, and the 'Cursed Race,' 16.

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Sergi's contention was that Greek and Roman civilizations emerged from a people nurtured in the Mediterranean basin rather than deriving from Aryans who migrated from either Asia or Northern Europe. Peter D'Agostino has argued that by demonstrating how Greco-Latin civilization, the crown jewel in Sergi's argument, was created by the Eurafricans rather than Aryans, Sergi had browned Europe.[100] The Eurafrican was not a Caucasian but rather a "brown human variety, neither white nor negroid, but pure in its elements, that is to say not a product of the mixture of Whites with Negroes or negroid peoples." For Sergi, the key historical transformation of Europe would come with the Aryan invasions from Asia. Driving the Eurafrican out of most of northern Europe and France, part of Spain, northern Italy, and Switzerland, this transformation of Europe only slightly affected the Mediterranean region. In fact, south of the Po Valley Italy would remain as it did in primitive times, untouched and unscathed by the Aryan invasions from Asia. It would be in southern Europe where much of this primitive Eurafrican stock would be preserved.

Although modern Italians may have reveled in theories which argued that Latin was a language formed in Italy rather than imported from Germany, Sergi's influential conclusions forcefully contributed to the racial marking that maligned southern Italians within the highly racialized political context of the 1890s.[101] In a later work, *Aryans and Italici* (1898) Sergi elaborated upon the two distinct races and civilizations which divided

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[100]D'Agostino, 9.

[101]Ibid., 10-11. See also, Teti, *La razza maladetta*, esp. 175-84, and Dickie, *Darkest Italy*, passim.

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Italy, the Aryans, and another Mediterranean people, the Etruscans. Building upon the theories in *The Mediterranean Race*, Sergi noted distinct racial differences between these two races. Aryans—the predecessors to modern day Northern Italians—were perceived to possess strong sentiments of social organization manifest in their response to order, discipline and education. By contrast, Mediterraneans—those south of Rome—were cast as individualists to the point of rebellion. According to Sergi, Mediterraneans were "undisciplined and often unable to be educated. The former [Aryans] want the freedom to act but subordinate [that freedom] to common social action, while the latter want freedom to act only for themselves...and easily become oppressors of their associates."[102] Sergi reasoned that the only recourse for southern Italians to ameliorate their racial inferiority was to intermarry with Aryans. Only then would the social and cultural status of southern Italy begin to improve.

In 1899, four years after Sergi's *Mediterranean Race*, the United States Commissioner-General of Immigration revised the government's classification of Italians and began to distinguish between North and South Italians as two distinct peoples. However, choosing selectively form Sergi's conclusions, the material dealing with the prominence of Eurafrican peoples, as well as cranium size, was all but ignored. Instead, the focus remained on the skin color of these immigrants and on the racial caricatures of southern Italian psychology that were used for political purposes in the United States. Ignoring Sergi's scientific disdain for a division of races based upon external factors such

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[102]Sergi quoted in D'Agostino, 11.

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as skin color, volume five of the Dillingham Commission's findings, the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, maintained that humanity was divided among the "white, black, yellow, brown, and red races." This categorization would enable the Commission to establish that there was a scientifically sanctioned hierarchy of races rooted in the specific skin color of the various peoples. Citing Sergi as an expert on the Mediterranean race of both southern Italians and North Africans, the Commission chose to ignore--or reject--his claims for the African origins of primitive northern Europeans. According to D'Agostino, "It is as if the Commission Report could tolerate whiteness having its origins and even contemporary settlements outside of Europe, but it could not bear the notion that those primitive Europeans were brown and not Caucasian."[103]

What the Commission did say about Italians, although not necessarily true to Sergi's theories, served to re-enforce and shape the contours and parameters of racial nativism by separating southern Italians from northern Europeans and linking them with perceived darker races. According to Sergi Italians were anything but a homogenous race. Instead, in the southern half of the Apennine mountain chain, the artificial "boundary" separating North from South, lived a materially distinct race, linguistically, characteristically, and most prominently physically, that traced its origin to the Hamitic stock of northern Africa. "It must be remembered," stated the Commission, "that the Hamites are not Negrotic or true African, although there may be some traces of an infusion of African blood in this stock in certain communities of Sicily and Sardinia, as

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[103]D'Agostino, 18-20.

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well as in northern Africa."[104] However, the *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* noted that members of the Hamitic stock "would be taken by travelers to be Negroes."[105]

The Commission had followed the guidelines set forth by the Bureau of Immigration in 1899 which classified arriving immigrants by races or peoples. This list identified some 45 different "races," of which Italians were divided into two parts--Northern Italian and Southern Italian.[106] This demarcation was crucial in the Commission's findings because it illuminated stark racial differences between the two noting, that, unlike their northern opposites, southern Italian were characterized as a "long-headed, dark, 'Mediterranean' race of short stature." The distinction between southern and northern Italians continued up through the 1930s, as evidenced by citizenship papers that listed the race of Italian immigrants as "Italian, South."[107]

The alleged inferiority of southern Italians was clearly intertwined with assumptions about whether these immigrants were "white" or "black." On his European

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[104]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, Vol. I, *Abstract of Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 250.

[105]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, Vol. IX, *Abstract of Reports of the Immigration Commission* (Washington, D.C.: 41 vols,1911), 125.

[106]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, Vol. I, *Abstract of Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 17.

[107]Citizenship papers of this period make it clear that the racial distinction of southern Italian was a construct that resonated well into the 1930s. Certificate of Citizenship Papers, Department of Labor, Antonio Porpora,1934; Frank Squicimarro,1930; Vincenzo Como,1933; Francesco Gentile,1930, all included in the exhibition on "The Italians of New York," held at the New-York Historical society in 1999.

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tour in 1886. Frederick Douglass duly noted that as one moved southward from Paris to Rome "he will observe an increase of black hair, black eyes, full lips, and dark complexions."[108] Indeed, as Robert Orsi points out, over the last two centuries the skin color of emigrants to the United States had been darkening as the points of embarkation shifted from northern Europe to southern and eastern Europe, the Caribbean, East Asia, and Mexico, and then again most recently to South Asia and South and Central America. Because the immigration from southern Italy coincided with the great migration northward of southern African Americans, African Caribbeans, and a little later Puerto Ricans and Mexicans, Italians belonged to the first wave of dark-skinned, or "non-white" immigrants.[109] This point is illustrated by Ralph Waldo Emerson's observation regarding his preference for the "old" immigrant. Emerson waxed nostalgically about the immigration that brought the "light complexion, the blue eyes of Europe," rather than "the black eyes, the black drop, the Europe of Europe . . . ."[110]

Whiteness as an historical construct was undergoing a transformation whereby "races" subsumed under the classification of Caucasian were now differentiated as "non-white." Therefore, a "new " immigrant's ability to assimilate and become a worthy citizen of the republic was questioned as well as feared. The open door policy that the

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[108]Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 989.

[109]Robert Orsi, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street *Feste* and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem,1920-1990," *American Quarterly*, Vol.44, No.3 (September 1992), 316.

[110]Higham, 65

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United States had long advocated was now under scrutiny. Liberty was perceived as an ideal only "white" Americans could aspire to and enhance. Indeed, in Thomas Bailey Aldrich's nativist poem, "Unguarded Gates,' appearing in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1892, he lamented that the United States would one day become the "cesspool of Europe." Aldrich wrote,

> In the street and alley what strange tongues are these
> Accents of menace alien to our air,
> Voices that once the tower of Babel knew!
> O, Liberty, white goddess, is it well
> To leave the gate unguarded?

Liberty wears a white face in Aldrich's vision of an America whose greatness was being sapped by "swarthy" undesirables. The poem, although published in 1892, was later used by Henry Cabot Lodge in his Congressional statement in support of his sponsored Literacy Test Bill in 1896 as well as submitted as testimony into the Dillingham Commission Report's volume on immigration and its restriction.[111]

Although recent scholars have grown accustomed to using the phrase "inbetween" to describe Italian racial status in America, the concept was already being used in the contemporary press of the 1890s.[112] A 1899 headline in a New York newspaper read: "Italians in Louisiana: Lynch Law Applied to Italians Alone Among White Men Because They Are Classed Somewhere Between White Men and Negroes." The newspaper

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[111]Poem quoted from Kessner, *The Golden Door*, 25; for published text of Lodge's statement see John J.Appel, ed., *The New Immigration* (Pitman Publishing Corp., New York: 1971),125-132.

[112]For work that focuses upon the "inbetweeness" see Introduction, note 15.

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theorized that the Southern Italian "is as it were a link connecting the white and black races. Swarthy in color the Sicilians are darker than the griffes and quadroons, the Negro half-breeds of southern Louisiana."[113] A popular contemporary work of fiction revolving around the 1891 lynching of Italians offered its observation about the essential racial character of the Sicilian: "the Sicilian have always been the most bloody-minded and revengeful of the Mediterranean races . . . . These traits are probably owing to their saracen origin . . . ."[114]

It was not only popular perceptions that likened the phenotypic appearance of southern Italians to that of African Americans, but American legal decisions buttressed and shaped that perception. There is the example of Jim Rollins, an African American man convicted of "miscegenation" in 1922 in Alabama. Local statutes prohibited interracial marriage, as well as interracial sexual relations, and these laws aimed primarily at keeping whites and African Americans apart---the motivation was "to maintain racial purity." In 1922 the Alabama Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the conviction of Jim Rollins on the grounds that the previous court had produced "no competent evidence to show that the woman in question, Edith LaBue, was a white woman." In fact, LaBue was a Sicilian immigrant--a fact that the court held "could in no sense be taken as conclusive that she was not a negro or a descendant of a negro."[115]

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[113]*The New York Sun*, August 4,1899.

[114]Jacobson, 61.

[115]Ibid., 4.

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At first, many white Southerners welcomed the influx of foreign immigrants as an addition to the labor force. Throughout the Mississippi Delta region cotton and sugar planters, as well as academics, such as economist Alfred Holt Stone, conducted "scientific experiments" that compared the productivity of African American and Sicilian agricultural laborers. In all these "experiments" the Italians were lauded for their industry, thriftiness, and reliability. The presumed results of these tests were spread through newspapers such as the *Daily Picayune* in Louisiana, as well as in trade papers.

Although recruited by white planters to replace what were considered "lazy" African American workers, the perception by white Americans that southern Italians immigrants were racially "between" white and black--in fact a third race-- caused concern.[116] Prescott F. Hall, who co-founded the Immigration Restriction League in 1893, believed that the biological fact that southern Italians possessed a "Negro strain," coupled with their indifference to intermarriage with black races, could upend the South's social and political order. According to Hall,

> What would happen if a large Mediterranean population should be colonized in our Southern States and should interbreed with the negro population it finds there? This is not an imaginary possibility, for the dark-skinned races are more likely to settle in the southern part of this country . . . . Will the descendants of the emotional, fiery Italians submit to the social judgment that a man with a sixteenth or a thirty-second part of negro blood is a colored man who must occupy a position

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[116]Whayne argues that Italian immigrants on an Arkansas plantation were considered a "third race" between blacks and whites. Added to this status was the fact that they were "poor, Catholic, and spoke little or no English." See Jeannie M. Whayne, "Labor Relations and the Evolving Plantation: The Case of Sunnyside," 35, in Jeannie M.Whayne, *Shadows Over Sunnyside: An Arkansas Plantation in Transition, 1830-1945* (University of Arkansas Press, Fayetteville:1993).

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> socially, if not politically, inferior? Assuredly not, and thoughtful Southerners are already alarmed by this prospect.[117]

As the Immigration Commission saw it, the failure of southern Italians to accommodate themselves to prevailing racial norms in the Jim Crow South was equal to their inability to "Americanize." In fact, in 1909, the Report of the Immigration Commission saw southern Italians in the South as an impediment to Americanization. The report listed eight southern states, Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas, in which southern Italians, mostly from Sicily, resided. In rural areas of Louisiana more than 80% of the Italians were Sicilian immigrants. In addition, of the nearly 2,000 Italians living in Bryan, Texas, almost all were from either southern Italy or Sicily. The Commission suggested that these dense pockets of southern Italians in these areas might account " for the slower rate of Americanization in certain districts."[118]

This "between" status ascribed to Sicilians was partially due to their association with traditional "black labor." Many Sicilian immigrants worked during the *zuccarata*, or sugar harvest, in the parishes of Louisiana in the same system of farm labor and tenant farming that blacks had traditionally worked. According to Scarpaci, "in Louisiana, the

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[117]Prescott F. Hall, "The Future of American Ideals," *The North American Review*, Vol.195, No.1 (January 1912), 94-102. Quote on 99. Discussing the racial composition of the southern Italian in particular Hall added that "the South Italian, which constitutes the largest element in our present immigration, is one of the most mixed races in Europe and is partly African, owing to the negroid migration from Carthage to Italy." 95.

[118]United States Immigration Commission, Reports, Vol. I, *Abstract of Reports of the Immigration Commission*, 568.

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occupation of landless agricultural laborer bore a double stigma of low status. First, dirty and low paying work remained at the bottom of the occupational scale in a social system that equated job prestige with "clean" and high paying positions. Second, since blacks predominated in this position, the prejudices expressed against them influenced the way in which Sicilians were regarded."[119]

An article in *The New York Sun* in 1899 contended that Southern Italians "are willing to live in the same quarters with the Negroes and work side by side with them, and seem wholly destitute of that anti-negro prejudice which is one of the distinguishing features of all the white races in the South."[120] This report, an effort to illuminate the reasons behind the lynching of five Italians in Louisiana in 1899, revealed a great deal about the increasing concern by white Southerners over the maintenance of racial hierarchies in the South. Even though in certain sections of the Jim Crow South Italians would be considered white enough to be naturalized and to vote, socially they were seen to represent a problem. The phenotypic differences created confusion on the part of white Southerners as to exactly what color or race these immigrants belonged. Southern newspapers described Italian immigrants in racial terms that ranged from being "black as the blackest Negro in existence," to being "white," or simply as "Dagoes."[121] Some plantation time books illustrated this confusion or "betweeness" by separating African

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[119]Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes*, 244.

[120]*New York Sun*, August 4,1899.

[121]Cunningham, 34.

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Americans, "Dagoes" and whites in the payroll accounts.[122]

It was not only that Southern Italians did not look white--they also did not act white. Italian immigrants tended to ignore the racial codes in the South, which relied on a strict adherence to the color line. Interviews with the descendants of plantation workers reveal that Italians did not readily acclimate themselves to the racial norms of the South. Sicilians in Louisiana, the most populous Italian immigrant state in the South, appear to have borne no ill will against African Americans, whom they had no reason to dislike.[123] Scarpaci claims that hailing from such a diverse culture as Sicily, these immigrants came with no predisposition to racial prejudice.[124] Rather, the prevailing attitude of Sicilian immigrants towards African American co-workers appeared to be curiosity or indifference.

Because the feared shortage of labor never developed, job competition between these groups did not become a source of conflict. Although altercations inevitably occurred, racial tension does not appear to have been the source. The daughter of a sugar plantation owner in Louisiana observed with tremendous surprise that given the "stiletto agility of the Italians, and the ability of the negro with the quick razor, it was amazing that we had so few troubles."[125] In fact, the *Times-Democrat* noted the mutual sympathy

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[122]Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes*, 222.

[123]Ibid., 152.

[124]Ibid., 277.

[125]Florence Dymond, Box 453, Folder 10 titled "Grinding," The Florence Dymond Collection, Howard Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA.

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evident at the burial of the three Italians lynched in 1896, when African Americans and Italians mourned together and "went home from the scene almost terror-stricken." Indeed, many whites feared that the Italians would join with the African Americans to seek revenge for the murders.[126]

Adding to this perception of southern Italians was the indiscriminate manner in which Italian shopkeepers, merchants, and peddlers engaged in business transactions with and sold to African American customers. In Louisiana, commercial activity brought Italian fruit peddlers into direct contact with African Americans. To be sure, however, there were practical reasons for the business relationship. Since in many areas of Louisiana, as well as other counties in the South, the native white population dominated the retail trade, Italian merchants saw the African American community as a splendid market for cheap goods. By catering to this market, Italian peddlers established themselves in a competitive situation by taking their products on the road.[127] Selling fruit or owning saloons in African American communities did not carry much "prestige" for Italians with the white population but offered them economic opportunity. Indeed, the fact that an economic, and hence a social relationship, was forged drew the suspicion and ire of the native white community. The Italian peddlers were known to have employed African Americans, especially young boys, to help them with their fruit vending

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[126]Cunningham, 32.

[127]Scarpaci, *Italian Immigrants in Louisiana's Sugar Parishes*, 211-212.

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businesses.[128] After a fight between whites and Italians at a baseball game in Independence, Louisiana, an editorial in the *Daily Picayune* warned that these Italians "are able to make money out of the negroes, and the result is a sort of traffic that causes serious disagreements with the balance of the population."[129]

Economic competition between whites and Italians certainly influenced this hostile reaction, but the "serious disagreements" that the "balance of the population" had because of the Italian association with African Americans did not rest on economics alone.[130] Given the uncertain racial status of Italian immigrants in the segregationist South, the manner in which these newcomers violated standing racial norms provoked suspicion and made southern Italian immigrants vulnerable to racial violence in the South.

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The accounts of lynching detailed in earlier chapters were only two among others in a long pattern of violence against Italian immigrants. The 1891 New Orleans lynching of

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[128]Ibid., 150.

[129]Ibid., 254.

[130]Scarpaci stated that "direct economic competition for jobs obviously provoked hostility against Italians in Louisiana." Further, she argued that "much of the hostility directed against Italians in a period of crime, as had been the case in the Hahnville and Tallulah episodes, appeared to be connected with economic competition." Ibid., 253-255. Richard Gambino also places emphasis on economic factors leading to the lynching of 11 Italians in New Orleans in 1891 in *Vendetta: A True Story of the Worst Lynching in America, the Mass Murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the Vicious Motivations Behind It, and the Tragic Repercussions That Linger to This Day* (Doubleday, New York: 1977).

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11 Italian immigrants was merely the most notorious. In the 1890s alone, 5 other lynchings of Italian immigrants occurred in various states. Including 1891, there were three in Louisiana, one in West Virginia and two in Colorado; in Mississippi there were lynchings in 1886 and 1901; one in Arkansas in 1901; one in Florida in 1910; and two in Illinois in 1914 and 1915. In total, 46 Italians were murdered at the hands of lynch mobs.

Lynching was not unique to southern life, as evidenced by the vigilante violence that gripped the West, but its proportion and significance remained unmatched outside of the South. The percentage of lynchings that occurred in the South as compared with other regions increased with each decade after the Civil War from 82% of all lynchings during the 1880s to more than 95% during the 1920s. Since lynching deaths were initially recorded in 1882, 85 percent of all victims in the South were black. These percentages are certainly higher in light of all the lynchings that went unreported.[131] In this context, how did African Americans interpret the growing number of Italian immigrants being lynched in the South? Did they subscribe to the same racial perception as white Americans regarding southern Italians? Or, did a shared sense of victimization inspire empathy for these newcomers? The observations of two prominent African American leaders during separate visits to southern Italy in the late nineteenth century are suggestive in this regard.

While in Rome in 1886, Frederick Douglass commented that in many respects he saw evidence "of a common identity with the African." Speaking more specifically of the

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[131]Palmer, *Passageways*, 1, 109-110.

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practice of carrying materials on top of the head. Douglass claimed that although he had seen it alleged that this habit was a mark of inferiority peculiar to the negro--an allegation he refuted--he was glad to see that "this custom is about as common in Italy there as it is among the dusky daughters of the Nile. Even if originated by the Negro . . . in any case it may be welcomed as a proof of a common brotherhood."[132]

A trip through Naples and Sicily in 1911 left Booker T. Washington, the prominent African American intellectual, with a new opinion of southern Italians as a race.

> I went to Italy with the notion that the Sicilians were a race of brigands, a sullen and irritable people who were disposed at any moment to be swept off their feet by violent and murderous passions. I came away with the feeling that . . . they were, at the very least, more sinned against than sinning, and that they deserve the sympathy rather than the condemnation of the world.[133]

As he toured the impoverished regions of Naples and the brutal conditions of child labor in the sulfur mines of Sicily, Washington was empathetic toward the people who had been described to him as "inferior." Using a frame of reference all too familiar with his own race, Washington compared the conditions of squalor that many Italians lived in as equal or worse to that of African Americans during and after slavery. Speaking of the plight of impoverished African Americans in cities such as New Orleans, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and New York, Washington observed that "as far as the actual hardships

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[132]Douglass, *Autobiographies*, 990.

[133]Louis R.Harlan and Raymond W.Smock, eds., *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Vol. 11 [1911-12], (University of Illinois Press, Chicago: 1981), 232.

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they have to endure or the opportunities open to them, the condition of the Negro in these cities does not compare, in my opinion, with that of the masses of the Italians in these southern Italian cities."[134] Moreover, living quarters were "not as large as the average one-room Negro cabin in the South."[135] The farm implements used in the Italian south "were much like the heavy tools I had seen slaves use on the plantations before the Civil War."[136] More illuminating was the statement that the cruelties and conditions in which Sicilian children were sold into slavery in sulfur mines "are as bad as anything that was ever reported of the cruelties of Negro slavery."[137]

These observations serve not to compare or contrast the conditions of southern Italian peasants and African Americans in the United States before and after slavery. Rather, Washington's statements reveal a sense of how southern Italians were perceived--in this case by one African American man--and how these perceptions may have changed under various circumstances. More to the point, to what degree did a more general sympathy for Italians Americans exist in the African American mind?

As the process of immigration continued into the early twentieth century, the threat of economic competition struck a nerve in some African Americans, but this was not Washington's view—he believed that the "studies" forecasting the success of the

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[134]Ibid., 204.

[135]Ibid., 207.

[136]Ibid., 201.

[137]Ibid., 226.

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Italian laborer, particularly in the South, were premature in their conclusions and did not account for the accompanying difficulties in recruiting Italian labor. While acknowledging the skills of the Italian farm laborer, Washington warned that these immigrants would be harder to manage than African Americans: "He is an alien: he does not desire to settle in the country, as a rule, and remains only long enough to make enough money to return to Italy." Welcoming the competition as a "good" thing for African Americans, Washington remained "doubtful about the ultimate effect upon social conditions."[138]

Not all African Americans were convinced that an influx of Italian immigrants would have such a negligible effect on black labor. *The New York Age* commented "There is going to be only one rival to the Afro American in the South in regards to labor and that is the Italian . . . . the Italians are in great numbers and are doing a great deal of work that the Afro-American ought to be doing." The article, entitled "Immigration Evils," stated that "usually one of the first things southern Italians learn after entering upon these shores is prejudice against the Afro-American, and they strive to bar him from various branches of labor . . . . The white American and Afro-American are shut out from employment on nearly every side by foreign socialistic labor, which mostly consists of Mafia-ites, highbinders, and anarchists."[139] The fear that Italian immigration to the South would be a disastrous process for the African American is further illustrated by a

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[138]Ibid., 278.

[139]*The New York Age*, February 21,1891; May 16,1891.

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letter written to the *New York Age* in 1906 recommending that African Americans "hold" the labor of the South, thus precluding immigrant interest in that region. The concern was so dire that J.O. Nixon, who wrote the letter from North Carolina, speculated that if the "immigration movement which has for its ulterior object the supplanting of Negro labor in the South . . . should be successful it would be the greatest calamity that has befallen the Negro since he set foot upon this continent."[140]

Along with the indignation and anxiety over Italian immigration southward, ran an undercurrent of pride in the abilities and loyalty of black labor and an expectation that as "true" Americans this loyalty should be repaid. In many cases, African American opinion- makers were quick to point out that the South's "experiment" with Italians would fail. After an Italian man was beaten in Mississippi for trying to "get Italian children into white schools," the *Age* commented "the new departure of the South in inviting foreign immigration to supplant the tried and true black labor of that section is already bearing bitter fruit."[141] The *Detroit Plaindealer* satisfyingly recounted how Southern newspapers thought the Italian would replace black labor a few short years ago and extolled their qualities as workers. However, after the New Orleans lynching of 1891, "it doesn't think so now. In a few years more when labor troubles assume the attitude in the South that they have in the North the South will begin to realize that it

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[140]*The New York Age*, July 12,1906.

[141]*The New York Age*, October 10,1907.

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really has a problem on its hands."[142]

The lynching of Italians in the South offers an opportunity to examine the African American reaction to another race being victimized by a crime traditionally targeted to blacks. It appears that some of the hostility that may have lingered due to economic competition surfaced in response to the lynchings. Shortly after the lynching of eleven Italians in New Orleans, the *Detroit Plaindealer* stated that "Neither the Mafia nor the people of Louisiana are good citizens . . . . The Italians are as hot tempered as the 'chivalrous' Louisianans, and have no greater respect for law and authority than the best citizens of New Orleans, and it is not at all unlikely that more blood will flow as the result of the contest engaged in between these unworthy citizens of the Republic." Aside from viewing southern Italian immigrants as crime-prone, unworthy citizens, the paper asserted that these men got what they deserved for similar crimes perpetrated upon African Americans. "Most of the men who met such a violent death were but reaping the whirlwind, having sowed the wind while participating in many a like scene themselves. They were the handy canaille that hounded and harassed helpless Afro-Americans at the behest of these same best citizens who dealt with them after the same fashion."[143] Italian immigrants were not only characterized as "unworthy" additions to the country, but lumped together with the white oppressor class.

Economic competition or anxieties over potential labor displacement were among

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[142]*The Detroit Plaindealer*, April 24,1891.

[143]*The Detroit Plaindealer*, March 27,1891; May 15,1891.

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the myriad of factors that informed African American responses to Italian lynchings. Hence, a linear, chronological periodization cannot illuminate the African American perception of Italian immigrants.[144] Moreover, aside from the question of economic competition, a sense of common victimization, as well as sympathetic portrayals, permeated press accounts.

Many African American press accounts of the lynching of Italians served to confirm the South as a completely lawless region dominated by mob violence. The *New York Age* asked "Is The White South Civilized?" In its condemnation of the South, and especially the people that perpetrated the crime, the paper recounted in outrage the lynching of the "defenseless" Italians. According to the *Age*, "as defenseless as they were, under the protection of lawful authority, and easily to have been protected by fifty men, they were murdered by the 'the best citizens' . . . . "while the police looked on.[145] After the lynchings of 1899 in Tallulah, *The Richmond Planet* editorialized that the lynching "was without palliation or excuse. They were charged with murder when there

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[144]Arnold Shankman contends that the African American perception of the Italian immigrant falls into three chronological periods. From 1880-1900 blacks were hostile to Italians, both in the North and South; from 1900 to 1920s the image of Italians softened because of less economic competition due to African American migration North as well as restrictive immigration laws passed in the 1920s; the 1930s began another period of negativity as the Great Depression renewed economic strife between the two groups. Shankman's article surveys the African American press during the period and concludes that "economic conditions were the key determinant in explaining how blacks viewed Italians . . . . Given such feelings and the difference in the heritage of the black from that of the Italian, it is understandable that the two groups found it nearly impossible to become good friends." Arnold Shankman, "The Image of the Italian in the Afro-American Press 1886-1936," *Italian Americana*, (Fall/Winter, 1978), 38-49.

[145]*New York Age*, March 21,1891.

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had been no murder. They have since been charged with conspiracy when up to this writing it has not been proven . . . . Lawlessness is rampant. and civilization in many sections has been overthrown."[146] In 1891, the *Detroit Plaindealer* asserted that if "lynching was not a common and lauded practice [in the] South, the magnitude of this butchery might be attributed to a frenzy of the moment. But lynching is a Southern art, the details of which are deliberately planned and discussed . . . . The South is the only place in the civilized world where a mob is the last resort for justice. This time the fury of the mob is spent on eleven defenseless Italians, instead of Afro-Americans as has usually been the case."[147]

The *Leavenworth Advocate* (Kansas) and the *Richmond Planet* saw the kind of mob violence perpetrated upon southern Italians as something that affected the African American community as well. The *Advocate* wrote in 1891 that "mob violence if carried on in that shape will ultimately undermine our institutions . . . . Every citizen regardless of nationality should protest against mobs, it matters not where they occur, nor what the cause." After the lynching of the three Italian immigrants in Hahnville, Louisiana, in 1896, the *Richmond Planet* editorialized that "we are opposed to the lynching of white men or colored ones, no matter how heinous the crime committed. Such barbarous practices have no place in civilized communities."[148]

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[146]*Richmond Planet*, July 29,1899.

[147]*The Detroit Plaindealer*, March 20,1891.

[148]*Leavenworth Advocate*, May 9,1891; *Richmond Planet*, August 29,1896.

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Although at times African Americans perceived a connection between themselves and Italian immigrants, they were divided as to how to define, or where to place, Southern Italians racially. Responding to the Italian government's demand for an indemnity from the Federal government for the New Orleans lynching in 1891, *The Cleveland Gazette* exclaimed that the Federal government's half-hearted response for an investigation was absurd. *The Gazette* argued that if the aggrieved party were England, instead of Italy, "such a humiliating and ridiculous answer would never delay action half this long." This is a revealing observation. Just as white Americans excluded, or separated, Southern Italians from Northern Europeans, *The Gazette* made the same distinction by assuming preferential treatment for more "Anglo-Saxon" races. Indeed, *The American Citizen* (Kansas) clearly equated the Anglo-Saxon race with that of the oppressor class—a class in which they did not include Italians. Discussing the New Orleans case, the *American Citizen* maintained that "the jurymen were not only selected by persons not Italians, but were friends at least belong[ing] to the Anglo Saxon race . . . . the jury was selected from among the majority class. The power of their class to intimidate and bribe them was many times greater than the power of the poor Italians who live in New Orleans."[149]

African Americans did not generally see southern Italian immigrants as white. In the case of the Italian man who was beaten in Mississippi for attempting to enroll his children in white schools, racial signifiers of 'Italian' and 'white' were clearly differentiated by virtue of the fact that the ideology of segregated schools was upheld.

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[149]*The American Citizen*, March 20.1891.

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The *New York Age* concluded that "this extension of Southern intolerance toward another race is bound to further complicate the Southern problem and provoke anew discussion of the question, is the white South civilized?"[150]

This perception was by no means unanimous or universal within the African American press. In many instances, southern Italians were referred to simply as "white men," while at other times Italians were grouped together with Mexicans and referred to as "darky."[151] The confusion over southern Italian racial identity is most vividly illustrated in a chart in the African American newspaper *The Richmond Planet*. Listing the number of persons lynched for the year ending 1899, the paper printed the "names," "race-or color," charges made," and "place." Out of a total of 364 lynchings that year, the overwhelming majority came under the racial heading "colored." Ten or so came under the heading "white." The five Italian immigrants that were lynched in Tallulah, Louisiana in 1899 were labeled neither "colored" nor "white" but Italian.[152] Even through the eyes of American blacks, the southern Italian appeared lost in the confusion of indeterminate racial status.

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[150]*The New York Age*, October 10,1907.

[151]*The Richmond Planet*, August 26,1896; *The American Citizen*, August 7,1891.

[152]*The Richmond Planet*, August 5,1899.

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Chapter 3

"Always the Question of Race": Italian Racial Consciousness Becomes Italian American

In March 1891 New York City's *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, the largest circulation Italian-language daily paper in the United States,[153] printed a front page article entitled "Sempre la Questione di Razza"-- *Always the Question of Race*." The article centered on an African American named Wiley Overton who was a police officer at the Adams Street station house in Brooklyn, New York. As Overton returned to the station house one night after his first patrol, his white colleagues waged a protest against the hiring of the black officer, despite the fact that Overton was held in high esteem by his captain. All the white officers marched silently out of the precinct house. "There is no reason or logic," proclaimed *Il Progresso*, "that can save one against the prejudice of race." Offering its own conclusion to the situation, the *Progresso* noted that overt acts of violence by Overton's colleagues in an effort to force him to resign would be unnecessary--rather, predicted *Il Progresso*, it would be the cruel knowledge that he is not wanted in this "white man's society" that surely would force Wiley Overton to

[153]After 1900 *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* gained clear dominance in the country with a circulation that approached 100,000 by the 1920s. In addition to subscriptions, if you add the many who saw the paper from copies passed from one reader to another—a common practice in Italian immigrant communities—the totals could be perhaps five times greater. See Pozzetta, *The Italians of New York City*, 238.

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"voluntarily" resign his position.[154]

The *Progresso* article appeared keenly sensitive to the American racial dynamic as well as to its institutional structure. Similarly, in its coverage of Italian lynchings the *Progresso*—as well as the rest of the Italian American press in New York City—expressed a shared victimization with African Americans. This understanding of American racial hierarchies, however, was complicated by the Italian American perception of how Italy, as a European nation, measured in terms of contemporary racial theories. In dealing with the lynching of Italian immigrants, the Italian American press consistently denounced Southern whites, indeed Americans in general, by expressing outrage that atrocities such as these could happen in "civilized countries." In doing so, comparisons were frequently made to "savage, uncivilized" nations, especially to Africa. Ironically these judgments subtly reflected the fact that the Italian American press clearly subscribed to the prevailing hierarchy of races and assumed Italians were included in a greater European--therefore white--community that was believed to be higher on the racial scale of "civility" and "superiority" than Africa.

In the Italian American mind, hierarchies of civilization and race proved mutable and adaptable. The Italian American perception of Africa that had been formed and influenced in Italy, was transformed in the United States as a result of the encounter with a "different" kind of African—an African seen in close quarters as immigrants lived and worked beside African Americans in the South. For Italian immigrants in the United

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[154]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 28,1891.

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States, these "Africans" from America, were not the "cannibals or savages" they had associated in their minds with Africa. Rather, life in America had "civilized" blacks.

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Perceptions of Africa as an 'uncivilized,' 'savage' place are part of a long tradition rooted in 19th century Italian anthropological and biological views of race. In general, Italian anthropology did not adopt the most radical views of biological racism that were circulating in Europe. When applied to people of color, however, some Italian anthropologists did describe 'non-European races' in racist terms. This was especially true of the image of Africans in a wide range of Italian works, from scientific books to travel literature. At the root of some of the more extreme theories was the argument that "describing Africans as inferior did not imply racism." According to this twisted logic, Africans were viewed as so far outside the realm of civilized peoples that the notion of "inferiority" simply could not apply to them.[155]

In 1864, Filippo Manetta, the author of an influential treatise on black slavery, argued that contact with "white civilization" would be the only way to partially uplift those occupying the "lower rungs" of the racial scale. Writing to defend the southern states' position in the Civil War, Manetta proclaimed that "I am of the opinion that the dogma of the equality of man is damaging to our civilization . . . . If there are differences between individual and individual, why not between nation and nation, and between race and race? Why should there not be a sharp distinction between the European and the

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[155]Robert Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista* (La Nuova Italia, Florence: 1999), 157-69.

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Black, or between these two and the Chinese and the Hindustani?" Upholding European--hence Italian—civilization over that of blacks. Manetta believed that the only way to partially civilize them was to hold them in slavery under the dominance of the white man.[156] This kind of ideology resonated in the Italian American characterization of both Africans and African Americans and fueled a schizophrenic attitude in the Italian American press.

Within the context of the discussion of race the Italian American press consistently juxtaposed the concepts of savagery and civilization. A day after the eleven Italian immigrants were lynched in New Orleans in March 1891, a letter was published on the front page of Carlo Barsotti's *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. An Italian American by the name of Marchese expressed his shock and outrage over the cruel work of the mob in New Orleans and recounted that his hometown of Springfield, Massachusetts commiserated with the victims. However, what shocked Marchese the most was the fact that an atrocity like this could happen in a "civilized" nation such as America. Echoing a sentiment which would ring throughout the Italian American press, an exasperated Marchese concluded that barbaric lynchings might be expected in "*Africa tenebrosa*"--a dark, murky, sinister and hence, 'uncivilized' country--but not in the United States.[157] In

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[156]Filippo Manetta, *La razza negra nel suo stato selvaggio in Africa e nella sua duplice condizione di emancipata e di schiava in America* (Tip.Del Commercio, Turin:1864), 44.

[157]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 16,1891; After the lynching of 3 Italians in Hahnville, Louisiana in 1893 a letter written to *Il Progresso* from a man in New York City echoed almost verbatim the sentiments of Marchese's letter. Again, the word *tenebroso* was used to describe the African continent. Ibid., July 30,1893.

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a letter to another New York Italian American daily, *Cristofero Colombo*. Alberto Dini went one step further by maintaining that "not even the savage population of Central Africa would approve of such a disgraceful action."[158] According to a cynical Italian American press, the lines between African "savagery" and American "civilization" were becoming blurred: "*Ma dove siamo?*[But where are we?] The only difference now between the free sons of America and the savages of Africa is that Americans have yet to become flesh eating cannibals."[159] In a scathing indictment of American lawlessness, African "savagery" was held as the standard against which to judge American society. The *Cristofero Colombo* asserted, "at least cannibals respect the laws of primitive tribal justice so that a massacre like this would have been avoided."[160]

These examples reveal an Italian American view in unison with a wider European conception of Africa as an "uncivilized, barbaric" continent inhabited by "savages." The Italian image of Africa is that common to European discourse on Africa in general: the "black continent," or *continente Nero*, a sinister, dark place often described by the Italian word *tenebrosa*.[161] In perceiving Italian immigrants as part of the European race writ

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[158]*Cristofero Colombo*, March 18,1891. An article in *Cristofero Colombo* expressed outrage and surprise that an atrocity such as this "would happen in a 'civilized' nation such as America . . . . if it had occurred in Africa this type of savagery would be more understandable." Ibid., March 20,1891.

[159]*L'Araldo Italiano*, August 11,1896.

[160]*Cristofero Colombo*, March 15,1891.

[161]*Eco d'Italia*, March 5,1896; *L'Araldo Italiano*, March 10,1896; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 16,1891.

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large, the Italian American press subscribed to racial rankings that placed "European" races above what was considered "negro"—or "African"—races. This discourse was fueled by the Italian American construction of cultural nationalism which created an idealized image of Italy--an Italy they had mythicized as a central symbol of European culture due to the achievements of icons such as DaVinci, Dante, and Michelangelo. Further, Italy became a symbol for civilization in a racial sense because of the imperialist forays of the Italian government into Africa in the 1880s and 1890s. The concept of "cultural nationalism" was constructed despite the fact that most immigrants had left an Italy they never held in high regard while living there.

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It has usually been thought that World War I was the first major external event to shape Italian American community formation. Archival evidence suggests, however, that the international event that first ignited the Italian immigrant community in the United States revolved around imperialism and race. Italy's attempts to colonize Ethiopia in the 1890s functioned as an important element in community-formation within Italian immigrant enclaves. Coming to the United States without a real sense of national identity as Italians, in the United States they had maintained loyalty to their local village and family. These local allegiances would eventually give way in the United States to a national identity as the pressures of assimilation manifest in prejudice and discrimination would lead Italian Americans to construct a defense mechanism against Americanization. Historians have examined the role Fascism and Mussolini have played in this context,

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but the Italian colonial experience in Africa illustrates that the origins of this transformation had earlier roots.[162] In effect, demonstrations of support for the Italian colonial war in Ethiopia was an example of "transnationalism" operating in the Italian immigrant colonies.[163]

"Although there is support in Italy, we here in the United States want to assert our solidarity with our brothers across the great ocean . . . . our sentiments are so strong we need to assert ourselves as Italians."[164] So read a portion of a leaflet that was printed in Baltimore by *Il Comitato Italiano*, an Italian immigrant organization that supported Italy during its Ethiopian campaign. Addressed to "*Connazionali*," or countrymen, the leaflet was distributed all over the country--even as far as Denver, Colorado-- to champion the cause of the homeland.

Throughout the campaign, which had begun in January 1896, such manifestations of support for Italian victory over African forces appeared to be ubiquitous within the Italian immigrant communities from Lawrence, Massachusetts to Chicago, Illinois. The rabid enthusiasm Italian Americans displayed for the Italian campaign was not just a reaction to the news of what was considered "humiliating" military defeats to an

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[162]Philip V. Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy: Italian Americans and Fascism, 1921-1929* (West Lafayette: Purdue University, Bordighera Press:1999). On Italian immigrants and community formation see 4-7.

[163]See Chapter 1 for the impact of Italian colonial policies in Africa upon the racial consciousness of Italians.

[164]Leaflet, Connazionali, January 21,1896, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

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"inferior" people—such as was the perspective after the Battle of Adowa—but had already been forthcoming from the immigrant community.[165] Italian immigrants inaugurated new ethnic organizations which began by "saluting the heroic Italian soldiers in Africa and the hope for a deserved victory."[166] A group of Italian women in Chicago organized within the ethnic community a collection drive specifically for the war with Ethiopia, the proceeds of which were sent directly to Queen Margherita of Italy.[167] Italian American men were sufficiently inspired to offer their lives in the war against Africa. In Colorado some wrote letters to the Italian Ambassador in Washington requesting permission to send volunteer soldiers to fight in Eritrea.[168] In New York, one Italian captain was recruiting men to fight in the name of the Italian Ambassador until it was discovered that he was not authorized to do so.[169] Perhaps the most symbolic example of

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[165]Francesco Marrocco to Consul General, New York, April 17,1896. Carlo Ginocchio to Italian Ambassador in Washington, D.C., April 2,1896, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

[166]Consul General of New York. April 17,1896, G.B.Rosasco to Italian Ambassador in Washington D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

[167]C.Pierorazio, Chicago, Ill. to Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

[168]Italian Consul, Denver, CO., to Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C., February 14,1896, ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

[169]Archangelo Pagani, Director of Agency for the Employment of Both Sexes in New York City, to Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la

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the nationalist sentiment provoked by the African campaign came from a letter to the Italian Ambassador in Washington. The letter was written in the name of a retired captain who had served in the Italian Cavalry in 1867 and now asked if he could be accorded the honor of serving as a simple soldier in the Italian war effort in Africa.[170] Although the Italian Embassy politely refused all considerations for Italian American volunteer soldiers, not to mention the symbolic gesture of a retired officer, such overtures illustrated the range of enthusiasm for Italian colonial aims in Africa.

Helping to make the African campaign a *cause celebre* within the Italian American community were Italian-language newspapers, which competed to raise money for the war effort. In New York City, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* expressed outrage that rival paper *L'Araldo Italiano* would allow an Italian committee from Baltimore to advertise efforts to raise money in New York. *L'Araldo Italiano* responded by accusing Carlo Barsotti, owner of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, of embezzling contributions from his constituents.[171] Loyalty to Italy became so intense during the African campaign that Italian Americans began to coalesce as a community around Italy's attempt to subjugate African peoples.

This form of transnationalism was reflected in the pages of the Italian-language

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campagna d'Africa,1896."

[170]Professor V.A. Scaletta, Montreal, Canada, to Italian Ambassador, Washington, D.C., ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 107, fascicolo 14, "Mobilitazione di italiani negli S.U. per la campagna d'Africa,1896."

[171]*L'Araldo Italiano*, March 11,1896; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 19,1896, March 22,1896.

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press. During the latter part of the nineteenth century, Italy, much like the United States, was perceived to be on a "civilizing" mission in Africa. References to Africa are laced with commentary such as the "success in civilizing the African and suppressing the inferior race will hopefully benefit the civilized world . . . . Black, obscure Africa is almost coming into the light. European civilization will be imported by love or by force—with religion or with the machine gun. Civilizing the inferior races is not a question of sentiment, it is a necessity that the civilized races cannot ignore."[172] Leopoldo Franchetti, an Italian statesman who had helped expose the terrible conditions in Sicily and now urged colonization of Eritrea by Italian peasants, warned that "to abandon the Italian colonies was impossible. The great benefit would be in creating an Italian race on the other side of the sea-- a democratic society made up of proprietary farmers."[173] The connection between 'democracy' and 'civilization' is apparent in the Italian colonial initiative to bring the 'progressive' forces of Italian civilization to Africa.

Italian-language readers in New York were exposed to the same contemporary racial adages that permeated the English-language press in regard to the dichotomy of 'civilization' and 'savagery.' After the Italian army suffered the costly defeat at Adowa in 1896, Italian Americans feared that losing to an African army would seriously harm Italian prestige in the eyes of the world—and especially in American society, which was already heaping prejudice on the new immigrants. After all, Africans were seen as

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[172]*Eco d'Italia*, March 5,1896.

[173]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 17,1891.

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"barbaric cannibals—eaters of raw meat—who lack civilizing influences like wearing shoes."[174] One article was vivid in its criticism of the physical attributes of Menelik, the Ethiopian emperor who led the war against Italy. He was described as possessing a "flat nose with large nostrils, a mouth that is too large along with large teeth that protrude outwards and are very visible as soon as he opens his fat lips..."[175] The Italian American press, like the Dillingham Commission and other official contemporary sources, saw a correlation between physical traits and racial superiority or inferiority. An article in *Eco d'Italia* lamented that through military assistance to African nations European countries such as Russia and France had violated custom and degraded themselves. "Russia and France have broken the usual agreement that European nations do not help these kinds of barbarians . . . . it was understood that European nations went there to bring civilization and progress—and that is what Italy is doing."[176] In defense of Italy's 'civilized' heritage, the Italian American press took exception to American portrayals of Italian immigrants as coming from a less desirable racial stock. Conceptions of cultural pride were linked with a sense of community to a greater Europe and permeated responses to indignities suffered in the United States. During protests of the 1891 New Orleans lynching, immigrants waxed patriotically about the importance of remembering the benefits that Italians had brought to the civilized world. One pointed out that it was America that benefited

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[174]*Eco d'Italia*, March 26,1896; *L'Araldo Italiano*, March 20,1896.

[175]*Eco d'Italia*, April 9,1896.

[176]Ibid., April 30,1896.

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particularly from the Italian donations of progress and civilization embodied in Christopher Columbus.[177] In a sense, Italian Americans wanted to re-affirm in their own mind, let alone convince Americans of, their place in the "civilized" world.

The Italian American press deemed Italian civilization a construct that Americans should learn from rather than decry. Expressing the hope that the community meetings held in New York City to protest the 1891 lynching would be conducted in the spirit of equality and independence, the *Cristofero Colombo* declared that "we need to behave according to the highest standards of Italian civility . . . . in doing so we will give a lesson in civility to the American people."[178] Chastising the United States for not protecting Italian Americans within her cities, *Il Progresso* proclaimed that despite the lynchings, Italy continues to "protect the life of Americans in its country . . . . this is a lesson in civility that the United States should learn from Italy . . . . *Old Latin civility* is not dead but gives a lesson to the world."[179] Clearly, the idea that civilization was an inherent quality based upon 'race' resonated in Italian American outrage over the lynching.

Notwithstanding all the vituperative attacks in the press, some Italians continued to endorse America's self-proclaimed role as a 'civilizing nation.' Giuseppe Giacosa, a well-known playwright from northern Italy who toured the United States in the 1890s, declared that "anyone who has lived here for any length of time must readily

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[177] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 24,1891.

[178] *Cristofero Colombo*, March 22,1891.

[179] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 10,1899 (italics mine).

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acknowledge that the [American] people behave in a more civilized and dignified manner than ours."[180] But Giacosa was the exception to the rule. Premised on the assumption that America was a leading, if not the leading, 'civilized' nation in the world, most Italians pondered how heinous offenses such as lynchings could be committed. The passionate reaction of the Italian American, and even the Italian, press reflected disappointment with the United States' behavior. "How can they be the most civilized people in the world if they lynch people," asked *Il Progresso*, "lynchings only occur in uncivilized nations . . . . And if it is a civilized nation, she [America] has a duty to educate the barbarians from the South."[181] American claims to be bearing the "white man's burden" and transporting civilization to 'unenlightened' nations were attacked as hypocritical by angry and disappointed Italian Americans. American missionary excursions into China and central Africa were seen as ironic in light of the kind of 'uncivilized' behavior rampant within American borders.[182]

Given the opinions expressed by Italian Americans that behavior such as this was expected in Africa, but not in America, perhaps the harshest contemporary criticism "demoted" American civilization to a racial classification akin to African. In 1899, *Il Progresso* declared "why do they say they[Americans] have to send people to civilize the barbarians in the Philippines when we have white *Matabeli* here in the United States."

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[180]Giuseppe Giacosa, *Impressioni d'America* (Tipografia Editrice L.F. Cogliati, Milano: 1898), 153.

[181]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 29,1899.

[182]Ibid., March 16,1891.

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The word *Matabeli* is derived from the root word Matabeleland, modern-day Zimbabwe, and home of the fierce warrior Zulu. Here the uncivilized actions of Americans belie their supposed mission to civilize people such as the Zulu tribes of Africa. By juxtaposing racial signifiers and giving the "savage" a white face, use of the term "white *Matabeli*" raised questions as to whether *Il Progresso* believed Americans could ever be completely equivalent to "uncivilized" Africans.[183] Again, whiteness had distinguished them from African "savages."

Echoing earlier Italian press sentiment, the Italian Foreign Minister railed that the violence perpetrated upon Italian subjects in the United States were not only crimes against Italians, but "against the interests and laws of civilization."[184] In this context, a revealing discussion of slavery emerged in articles from the Italian press re-printed in Italian American newspapers. From Milan, the daily *Il Secolo* wrote that "we are admirers of the great institutions of the United States such as individual liberty, but we condemn the savage actions that a great nation has been unable to escape from . . . . We Italians on this side of the ocean are much less aggressive and more civilized. "[185] Interestingly, the Italian press viewed the lynchings as routine for a city like New Orleans, which had been one of the centers of the black slave trade. "Especially in New Orleans,"

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[183]Ibid., August 5,1899.

[184]Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rome, to Ambassador,Washington D.C., April 7,1900, "Linciaggio di Tallulah: bills Davis e Hitt:1900-1901," ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 103, p8, n1866.

[185]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 29,1891.

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lamented *Il Secolo*, "where there live the descendants of slave traders and slavery, the ferocious acts that occurred during the grand war of secession continue to happen." *Il Diritto* maintained that the "ideology of reactionaries was still prevalent in the secessionist South even after the Civil War . . . . it is a shame that a great war was fought to abolish slavery, a war that we admired them for, and yet it did not mean anything. They went to war against human slavery and [now] they let their own citizens commit crimes such as this."[186]

Italians condemned slavery as an inhumane and immoral institution, but they also surmised that slavery had unintended consequences. Initially, the Italian perception of the Civil War as a noble crusade against slavery may seem inconsistent with its image of Africans as "savage and uncivilized." However, Manetta's theory that slavery partially "civilized" Africans seems to have permeated Italian thought, which made a distinction between "savage" Africans and African Americans. The commentary of one traveler, Alberto Pecorini in 1909, expressed the opinion that although morally the North was correct in fighting the Civil War, practically it had been a mistake.[187] Pecorini's analysis stressed the morality of abolition, but is littered with the ideology that African Americans were "unprepared" for freedom. Pecorini did not depict African Americans held in bondage as "uncivilized savage Africans," but he did refer to American blacks as "semi-

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[186]Ibid.

[187]Alberto Pecorini, *Gli Americani nella vita moderna osservati da un italiano* (Fratelli Treves, Editori, Milano: 1909), 299-301.

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savage."[188] Pecorini, like Manetta, believed that this population had become partially civilized through bondage, indeed, the freed African American slaves were perceived to be in a state of limbo between "uncivilized Africa" and "civilized America." Citing W.E.B.DuBois' notion of a 'talented tenth,' Pecorini argued that the majority of blacks were not intelligent enough to use the rights they now possessed in freedom.[189] However, the admission that a portion of African Americans had the intelligence to function in the United States speaks to the opinion that this population did not resemble the "savages" so denigrated as the inhabitants of *Africa tenebrosa.* The notion that Italians, and hence Italian immigrants, made a distinction in their own racial consciousness between Africans and African Americans is buttressed by an ideology that a modern nation could "civilize" and integrate--even partially-- races that had once been "savage."

Apart from the theories of observers such as Manetta and Pecorini, what tangible conditions may have led Italian immigrants to construct such a distinction between Africans and African Americans? No doubt part of the answer lies in the close proximity in which Italian immigrants and African Americans often lived and worked in the South. Italian immigrants developed a real familiarity with African Americans that allowed them to make a distinction in their minds between "inferior" Africans and the African Americans they encountered in the United States. Their encounter with African

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[188]Ibid., 300.

[189]Ibid., 303.

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Americans triggered the development of a new category--or sub-category--in their own racial hierarchy. Ironically, this sub-category positioned African Americans as "in-between" people much like Americans would characterize Italians.

In the worldview of Italian immigrants, a number of factors--America's civilizing mission, partial civilization under slavery, and the fact that Italians could now see for themselves firsthand that people of color were not "uncivilized savages"--enabled African Americans to be distinguished from their African ancestors. Moreover, Italian immigrants in the South saw themselves bound together with African Americans as common victims of American prejudice.

The story of police officer Wiley Overton illuminates the kind of awareness Italian Americans possessed of racial prejudice in the United States. The article "Sempre la Questione di Razza" referred to at the opening of this chapter reveals that the Italian immigrant was not unfamiliar with the structures of institutionalized racism that were ubiquitous in America. Coming from southern Italy, which Northern Italians consistently derided as "Africa," and entering a country where their racial status was described as "between" white and black, afforded the Italian immigrants a clear understanding of the racial dynamic of white and black. After the 1891 New Orleans lynching, *Il Progresso* remarked that "although many thousands upon thousands in New Orleans dress in the genteel styles of the 19th century . . . . and have the privilege of white faces—they are much worse than the savage Indians with red skins."[190] Italian immigrants understood

[190]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 16,1891.

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that being white brought privileges in the United States, but that white skin did not necessarily translate into being 'civilized.'

The Italian American press reflected a palpable sense of shared victimization with African Americans. *Il Progresso* compared the sort of violence and lynching that victimized Italian immigrants in 1896 to the institutionalized violence the South had used to maintain slavery before the Civil War.[191] "Civilized America" is described in disappointed terms as "nothing more than a colossal hypocrisy where former slave owners have one hand on the Constitution and the other gripping the lash used to whip black slaves."[192] Further, the consistency with which lynchings of African Americans were reported on the front pages of New York Italian American newspapers in the 1890s and early 1900s illustrated not only empathy, but also an awareness of common racial victimization.[193] Although most of the reports simply recited the facts of each case and

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[191]Ibid., August 11,1896.

[192]Ibid., March 22,1891.

[193]In 1892 an Italian American newspaper in Colorado protested the death sentence received by an Italian immigrant, Pietro Augusto. Augusto had been convicted of killing a man that he had found cavorting with his wife. Taking up collections from the Italian American community, the newspaper railed against the principle of capital punishment. The paper argued that "we do not believe the death penalty is a necessity just like we do not believe that the other American institutions of Judge Lynch or the revolting White Hoods--which are often proclaimed in this country--are necessary." The terms Judge Lynch and White Hoods refer, of course, to the practice of lynching and to the Ku Klux Klan, respectively--both institutions that claimed African Americans as their primary victims. See unidentified newspaper clipping, 1892, "Azione in favore di Agosto Pietro condonnato a morte.1892-1893," ASMAE, Ambasciata di Washington, busta 66, fascicolo 6. Italian immigrants were targets--although on a much smaller scale--of the Ku Klux Klan's attention due to their dubious racial status. In Rudolph Vecoli's discussion of the Italian immigrants living and working in Minnesota's Iron Range, he notes the

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are devoid of strident commentary, the headlines told a different story. Phrases such as "The country of lynching," "Lynching at full speed," "Always Lynching," and "Another Negro lynched," connote a clear tone of exasperation and disgust, as well as an awareness that this was a endemic problem within the South.[194]

Often, the Italian American coverage of lynching graphically detailed the horrific violence undertaken by southern mobs. In July 1899 it was reported that two African Americans were lynched in Georgia after having been suspected of committing a crime against a Mrs.Ogletree. *L'Araldo Italiano* explained that the townspeople felt as if they had 'vindicated' the crime, delineating how the extent of this vendetta went beyond the usual limits that even mob participants considered "justifiable." The article recounted the cold-blooded calculation of the lynch mob as it deliberated as to the kind of death that

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distinction that was made between "'white men'--meaning northern Europeans--and the so-called 'black races' of southern Europe. These attitudes were exemplified by the march of the Ku Klux Klan through the Range cities." See "Italians on Minnesota's Iron Range," in Rudolph J.Vecoli, ed., *Italian Immigrants in Rural and Small Town America: Essays from the Fourteenth Annual Conference of the American Italian Historical Association* (American Italian Historical Association, 1987), 186.

[194]For example, *L'Araldo Italiano*, July 26,1899, July 27,1899, July 25,1901, August 3,1901, August 3,1901; *Cristofero Colombo*, June 21,1892, August 3,1893; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 21,1892, August 27,1901. Headlines quoted in *L'Araldo Italiano*, August 3,1901; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 21,1901; June 21,1892, August 27,1901. In research conducted around the dates of Italian American lynchings, these were just a portion of articles located and do not represent the full range of coverage pertaining to African American lynchings from the period of 1890 through 1915. Even in 1893, when an article in *Cristofero Colombo* condoned the lynching of a black man, the paper referred to the rarity of its support of lynching and argued how the highly gruesome nature of the crime could only be answered by desperate and extreme measures. The article detailed the brutal rape and murder of a mother and her daughter, claiming "this time, in this particular case, we lack the courage to speak out against lynching." *Cristofero Colombo*, August 3, 1893.

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should be carried out. After much wrangling, it was decided that this man, Louis Sammins, should hang but not without first being subjected to bodily mutilation. As this atrocity was in process, two more African Americans in a nearby area were found hanging, their bodies "skinned neatly in the manner of the work of Indians." Acknowledging the tenuous nature of African American life in the South, *L'Araldo Italiano* reported that one of the men was murdered only because he was in the company of the other two accused black men. "In this case," the *Araldo* told its readers, "the crowd, thirsty for vindication, wanted to drink of innocent blood."[195] Following up on this story the next day, *L'Araldo Italiano* acknowledged that the situation for African Americans in Georgia was perilous. "The population of the surrounding areas of Bainbridge and Saffold, Georgia . . . . have done nothing but lynch . . . . Another four negroes have paid with their lives for having been friends with the vagabonds . . . . and in general all the negroes without jobs or homes run a terrible risk by being seen in these areas."[196]

The same paper sounded a very similar alarm for Italian Americans in Virginia a few years later. In a report entitled "The Menace of lynching," Italian workers in West Virginia were said to be in grave danger from a mob that earlier in the day had lynched a black man accused of fatally wounding the local police chief.[197] Italian Americans came

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[195]*L'Araldo Italiano*, July 26,1899.

[196]Ibid., July 27,1899.

[197]Ibid., July 25,1901.

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to view lynching as a beast that could at any time transfer its wrath from African Americans toward Italian Americans.

Not every newspaper condemned lynching, even when it was directed toward Italian immigrants. In one instance in 1901 the two major New York Italian American newspapers engaged in a heated discussion over the continued lynching of Italian Americans in the South. On the night of July 10, 1901, John and Vincenzo Serio, brothers from Cefalu, Sicily, and their friend Salvatore Liberto, were asleep in their hammocks swung on the porch of their home in Greenville, Mississippi. Shortly after midnight they were awoken by a voice calling from the nearby bushes. As they arose to determine who would be calling at such a time of night, they were met with rifle and pistol fire. John and Vincenzo were killed after the first volley of fire, their bodies riddled by a half a dozen bullets. Salvatore, hit by a bullet to the groin, was mortally wounded. It was reported at the time of the murders that the men had been warned to leave the area because they were suspected of stealing cattle. They fled the neighborhood, returning only after unknown parties had notified them the trouble had blown over and that they would not harmed.[198]

An interesting opinion on the matter emerged in the *L'Araldo Italiano* that served as a lightning rod to the debate between this paper and *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. An article in *L'Araldo Italiano* under the byline of L. Paris placed the lynching of these Italians within the context of a broader discussion of lynching. Paris, in a play on two

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[198] *Arkansas Gazette*, July 13,1901.

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dominant stereotypes of Italians and African Americans, claimed that he supported the practice of lynching in special cases of habitual criminal offenses. He pointed to the hundreds of African Americans who were lynched, shot, and burned alive each year as proof of their continual 'violation' of white women. Speaking of the South's tendency to lynch Italians, Paris contended that they were victims of mob justice stemming not from racial hatred but rather from the Italian predilection toward violence. In other words, the violence emanating from Italian immigrant enclaves--apparently a characteristic Paris believed particular to Italians--forced Americans to react in this manner in order to maintain order. Although Paris was opposed to state sponsored execution, he perceived lynching as an act of "popular justice" that had a legitimate role to play in maintaining order in the United States.[199]

In fact, Paris posited a simile of lynching as a disease plaguing the United States just as yellow fever did in Brazil. Using a rationale that amounted to the idea that the 'Italian has to beware' upon entering America, he believed that it was the 'victim' who bore the responsibility of avoiding the wrath of lynch mobs. He explained that those who ventured to Brazil did so willingly and, despite taking precautions, ran the risk of contracting yellow fever. "More fortunate," he said, "are those, instead, who come to the United States and can assure themselves immunity from lynch law just by living according to the way they see a great majority of the good citizens living. The major difference between yellow fever and lynching lies in the fact that the former strikes at

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[199]*L'Araldo Italiano*, August 2, 1901, July 14,1901. In these articles, Paris echoed the general stereotype that Italians were prone to violence.

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random, while the latter instead strikes only those who seek it."[200]

The definition of lynching as an act of "popular justice" or as a result of the 'non-conformist' behavior of Italians and African Americans was re-enforced by a socio-psychological study that appeared in the English-language *International Monthly Magazine*. The study was published by Professor Nathaniel S. Shaler and received front-page attention from *L'Araldo Italiano* under the title "The Psychology of Lynching."[201] Shaler's study sought to understand the rationale motivating lynch mobs. He concluded that those who lynched had a need to feel superior to their victims; that mobs usually consisted of the 'best citizens' of towns; and that many who participated in lynching believed that its victims were bestial in nature and needed to be eliminated. Shaler provided a case for his arguments as to why Southern whites engaged in lynching, citing the case of hardworking white farmers in Georgia or Alabama living side by side with what he describes as "Ethiopian farmers as dark as charcoal." Revealing his bias in this supposedly "scientific" study, he asserted that although these blacks had a much different skin color than the white farmers, they should abide by the law. However, Shaler predicted that this would not be the case. Holding up the trope of white female virtue—the classic pro-lynching defense—Shaler related a familiar story: a black man forcefully entered the home of one white worker and raped his daughter. Moreover, after having gone to the police and suffered great public dishonor, the white man's ordeal had just

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[200] *L'Araldo Italiano*, July 25,1901.

[201] Ibid.

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begun—nine months later a black-skinned baby was born. Shaler asks, "Where is your shotgun? Where is the monster who did this? He is smoking a pipe in the country prison. And who knows, in a few months he may be freed to attack your family again . . . . however, the next time you will gather 100 of your friends that have wives, children and sisters and instead of relying on the law will rely on the rope and gun."

Shaler's aim, much like Paris,' was to interpret mob violence as a reaction to African American provocation. Shaler reverted to the opinion of many whites of the period that African Americans needed to be kept in check due to their own inability to control their brutish sexual behavior. In effect, it was the white man who was the victim in this scenario—subjected to the constant threat of the black man's "sexual bestiality." This kind of rationale appeared in unison with the opinions expressed in *L'Araldo Italiano*. In fact, the paper proclaimed that Shaler's study "gives persuasive reasons to explain how and why white Americans have developed certain characteristics and qualities . . . . never, since we have learned and understood the English language, have we found a writer who has examined the American moral plague of lynching with more astuteness than Professor Shaler."[202]

When the *L'Araldo Italiano* expressed these views in the context of the lynching of Italians in Mississippi, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* launched an all-out attack against what it considered anti-Italian, as well as anti-human, opinions. An editorial in *Il Progresso* described Paris' acceptance of lynching as "insane and cannibalistic." The

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[202]Ibid.

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paper considered *L'Araldo Italiano*'s refusal to condemn this lynching a "disgrace," and stridently "rejected the indecent words written about the two dead men."[203] While *L'Araldo Italiano's* view of the Mississippi lynching appears to have been a small minority in the mainstream New York Italian American press, the question of Italians, African Americans, and lynching was a topic fraught with passionate opinions.

Why would Italian Americans have such divergent racial conceptions of Africans and African Americans—both people of color descended from the same land? The answer lies in social and working environments that fostered intermingling and bred familiarity, the shared victimization of lynchings, as well as the concept that African Americans had undergone "civilizing" as a result of living in American society. In the immigrant mind this translated into the construction of a unique perception of African Americans, divergent from the view of Africa. When the Italian American press referred to Southern whites and American society as being like "uncivilized savages of Africa," it was looking through a lens of cultural nationalism. However, since the press never blatantly used the rhetoric of white American racism to degrade African Americans, a crucial distinction seems to have been made. In a complicated, multi-level, and somewhat contradictory manner, Italian Americans positioned African Americans higher on their racial scale than Africans. In Chapter 5 we will see that the Italian American press' view of Native Americans served to further buttress the notion that tangible familiarity informed such a distinction.

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[203] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 16,1901.

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Italian immigrants arrived in America with predetermined constructions of racial hierarchies and ideologies of civilization. Italian American racial consciousness of Africans—both in Africa and the diaspora—mutated from what can be labeled an "Italian construct" to an "Italian American" construct. The distinction between Africans and African Americans evolved over time and marked a process of change in Italian American thinking. The process would continue throughout the Italian American experience as the American descendants of these immigrants, facing different pressures and fears, would themselves wrestle with the same problem headlined in *Il Progresso* in 1891: "Sempre la Questione di Razza."

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Chapter 4

"Race Hatred Does Not Exist": Italian American Radicals and the 'Unconsciousness' of Race

In August of 1904 violence exploded across New Orleans, Louisiana, as mobs of whites and blacks engaged in a brutally violent confrontation apparently motivated by race hatred. However, according to the radicals of the Italian American Left, or *sovversivi* (subversives), the cry of race hatred was just a useful canard manipulated by capitalists in order to divide, and divert, the powerless workers from uniting and resisting the status quo. In the classic Marxist sense, "Blacks were used as an arm against organized workers and this was the reason that blood flowed on the plantations of the South and the mines of Idaho . . . . this was the reason that white workers saw blacks suspiciously."[204] *Il Proletario*, official organ of the Italian Socialist Federation in the United States, bluntly declared that "race hatred did [does] not exist" and that the American press used it skillfully to mis-direct workers from the evils of capitalism. In essence, the Italian American Left understood race as a social construction, but believed it had no viable essence. Its construction was the responsibility of the bourgeois class and served no purpose other than as a scheme to suppress the working classes.

Some contemporary scholars, such as Rudolph Vecoli and Salvatore Salerno, suggest that Italian American *sovversivi* consistently incorporated a critique of race into

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[204] *Il Proletario*, August 4,1900.

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their class analysis. Vecoli has argued that contrary to studies such as R.Laurence Moore's that claim Marxists failed to protest injustices to African Americans, Italian socialists were keenly sensitive to racial intolerance.[205] According to Vecoli, "whether it was because Italians were also regarded as an inferior race and subject to mob violence, or because racial injustice presented a conspicuous gap in the moral armor of the republic, Italian radicals consistently expressed horror at the barbaric treatment of blacks."[206] Salerno, studying Italian American anarchists, maintains that through *La Questione Sociale* Italian anarchists developed opinions on the issue of race and racism--distinct from class-- that distinguished them from their socialist comrades. However, this chapter suggests a alternative viewpoint to these depictions.

In their critique of American treatment of African Americans, Italian Leftists regularly reduced racial issues to class. In so doing, it is difficult to argue that the *sovversivi* grappled with questions of race, and racial constructs, while at the same time privileging class. Vecoli notes that the writings of anarchists and socialists regarding racial issues were "unusual for their empathy with blacks and their forthright rejection of racism. One would like to know to what extent such views extended beyond the radical leadership to the ranks of the Italian workers."[207] However, as delineated in Chapter 3 of

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[205]See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "'Free Country': The American Republic Viewed by the Italian Left, 1880-1920," in *In the Shadow of the Statue of Liberty: Immigrants, Workers, and Citizens in the American Republic, 1880-1920*, Marianne Debouzy, ed., (University of Illinois Press, Chicago: 1992), 33-34.

[206]Ibid., 33.

[207]Ibid., 34.

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this dissertation, the mainstream Italian language press, especially *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, maintained a much more consistent discussion and awareness of racial issues in the United States than the socialist or anarchist press examined here. *Il Progresso* frequently reported on race riots and attributed their cause to the white racial bias arising from the different skin color of Blacks and whites. Further, the coverage of Black lynchings was much more frequent in *Il Progresso* than in the radical press.

The anarchist position on racial issues within the United States was more explicit and nuanced in its racial awareness compared to the socialist mantra of "racism as a byproduct of capitalist exploitation." Salvatore Salerno has written about the Italian anarchists who formed *il Gruppo Diretto all'Esistenza* in Paterson, New Jersey in the early 1890s. The enclave was comprised mostly of northern Italian immigrants who were employed in the silk mills of Paterson, predominantly as skilled weavers and dyers. *Il Gruppo Diretto all'Esistenza* was one of the first foreign language locals within the Industrial Workers of the World and their work would establish Paterson as a major center of anarchist activity in the east. The group began publishing its newspaper, *La Questione Sociale*, in 1895 with Pietro Gori, the playwright and activist lawyer, playing a major role in founding the paper as well as serving as its first editor. Although some scholars label *La Questione Sociale* "anarcho-syndicalist," historian Nunzio Pernicone maintains that a more fitting description would be a "communist-anarchist" paper that supported the IWW, general strikes, and pro-organizational anarchism.[208]

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[208]Interview with Nunzio Pernicone, August 24,2001.

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George Carey has estimated that *il Gruppo Diretto all'Esistenza* had a membership between ninety to a hundred and *La Questione Sociale* a circulation of 1000. These numbers were quite large for a community of approximately 18,000, especially when the reader's families are added to the original 1000. However, according to Carey, the paper's influence reverberated beyond the borders of Paterson as it was distributed to anarchist groups in other cities in the United States, as well as to sympathizers outside the country. On March 21,1908 the postal authorities barred the paper from the mail on President Theodore Roosevelt's insistence, under the pretext of obscenity laws which cited the paper's content as immoral.[209]

Within the pages of *La Questione Sociale* there existed a more direct discussion of how race is constructed in the United States and who profits and loses from this negotiation. Similar to the ISF's *Il Proletario*, *La Questione Sociale* was critical of colonialism, imperialism, and nationalism. However, the Italian anarchists were more apt to discuss issues such as these with one eye on the racial aspects inherently interwoven with concepts such as colonialism and colonized peoples. According to Salerno, "the paper's discussion of race is significant because the writers saw nationalism and loyalty to American ideals as not disconnected from issues of race and racism. In a highly sarcastic article in 1903, *La Questione Sociale* simply stated, "the eternal problem in

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[209]An anarchist paper under the same name of *La Questione Sociale* was published between the years 1915 and 1917 in New York City, however, the latter had nothing to do with the original. The latter was published by Aldino Felicani, an anarchist, who would claim fame as the secretary and moving force behind the Sacco and Vanzetti Defense Committee.

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America is the racial problem." The article outlined the "solution" to the race problem posed by the governor of North Carolina, which included denying the vote to Blacks, segregation, and making Blacks aware that they were undeserving of civility. *La Questione Sociale* lamented that "the United States wants to give freedom, only in words, to the Negro people, but they don't want to agree that this race has to be treated equal to the white race . . . . Instead here is a solution posed by the Governor—one that would submit the black race to whites and make them slaves. Oh, what would the spirit of Lincoln say about this?"[210]

Upon closer examination of *La Questione Sociale*, however, Italian American anarchists reflected a schizophrenic view concerning the question of race in the United States. Racism as a category of analysis is perceived as an outgrowth of the inequitable social and class dynamic prevalent in the United States. Contrary to Salerno's assertion that the *Gruppo Diretto all' Esistenza* "struggled with the complexities of creating an analysis that didn't privilege class over race and culture," *La Questione Sociale* frequently perceived racism as a red herring manipulated by capitalists in order to conceal class inequalities. In 1906 an article entitled "Race Hatred?" explored the reasons behind the wars that were continually fought between "blacks, whites, Chinese, Europeans, Americans, and Indians."[211] It explicitly argued against those who maintained that racism abounded in the United States because America's diverse population was forced to live

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[210] *La Questione Sociale*, December 26,1903.

[211] *La Questione Sociale*, May 19,1906.

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"under the same roof." According to *La Questione Sociale*, "we believe that racism is very much linked to the class struggle that people are continually impotently fighting, serving little more than to conceal the reasons why another 'bourgeoisie' is developing in spite of 'progress.'[212]

In a similar fashion to how Italian American socialists interpreted the problem of race in America, anarchists filtered questions of race through the sieve of class struggle. Anarchists acknowledged race as a false category of analysis--one whose creation depended completely on the existence of the proletariat/bourgeoisie struggle. Supporting this view was the argument that if racism truly existed why did "fights and battles" still break out among people of the same race, for example, between Italians and French, Spanish and Germans, and Americans and Irish?" Racial solidarity was superseded in strength by the unbreakable cords of class which tied together capitalists of all different races and cultures in their oppression of the proletariat: "every time the proletariat comes to blows under the pretext of racism we see capitalists from every background are always willing to help one another in the struggle." Rather, a more cogent explanation would be that "this struggle is not one attributed to race, but under special circumstances, has developed into something we like to call a jealousy of trades, of business, that has conveniently been covered up with the term 'racism.'"[213] Italian American anarchists maintained socialist revolution as the only effective means to eradicate the inequitable

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[212]Ibid.

[213]Ibid.

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economic and social divisions within the country. A class based initiative aimed at dispossessing the bourgeoisie of all their wealth and power would strike at the heart of the problem, rather than at a smokescreen. For *La Questione Sociale*, "this said, the people of all different races will agree that racism really springs from misery, poverty, hunger, and exploitation by the lazy, good for nothing, minority of the silent sheepish majority."[214]

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Legends abound in the small, provincial villages that comprise much of southern Italy. Africo, a tiny village in the southern region of Calabria, where in 1910 only 1,776 people resided,[215] is site of the story of Saint Leo, popularly known as Beato Leone, who had lived during the fifth century. Beato Leone was much loved in both Africo and the town of Bova where he was born. Upon his death a struggle ensued between the people of both towns over where Leone's body would ultimately rest. The townspeople of Bova eventually succeeded in keeping the body, but offered one of Leone's fingers to the people of Africo. Thereafter, every May 12th, the inhabitants of Africo observed a ritual whereby all the sick and indigent would pilgrimage to the river LaVerde --where Beato used to cleanse himself--and pass under the box that contained Saint Leo's finger.[216]

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[214]Ibid.

[215]Antonio Melis and Rosario Nardi, eds., *Dizionario Geografico dei comuni e delle frazioni dei comuni* (Roma Societa' Tipografico-Editrice Romana,1910), 3; See also Luigi Fossati, ed., *Dizionario grafico-itinerario* (Bietti Editori, Milan:1902), 6.

[216]Giulio Palange, *La Regina dai Tre Seni: Guida alla Calabria magica e leggendaria* (Soveria Manelli, Catanzaro, Rubbettino,1994),9.

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To Italian American radicals "old world" scenes such as these were consistently frustrating. Ardently anti-clerical, Italian American radicals were vexed by the frequency, as well as the level of zealotry, with which these ritualistic traditions were transferred onto the streets of Italian immigrant enclaves in the United States. The *sovversivi*'s analysis of Africo is particularly revealing of the racial consciousness of Italian American radicals. Contemporaries speculated that Africo received its name from its original inhabitants--descendants of African slaves who were captured, and had possibly escaped, during the days of the Roman Empire. In 1911-1912 when the Italian imperial threat to seize Libya was met with immense criticism from Italian American radicals, *sovversivi* would classify Africo as a "barbarous and savage" village, in an effort to argue that Italian governmental policies of imperialism were misguided. Why would the Italian government insist on venturing to Libya to "civilize savages," declared Italian American radicals, when there existed in southern Italy "barbarians" such as those in Africo.[217] The case of Africo is but one example of many in which one can glean how the Italian American Left constructed categories of race and civilization. As such, it offers an excellent window through which one can analyze Italian American radical racial discourse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[218]

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[217]*Il Proletario*, April 19,1912.

[218]In his dissertation Michael Miller Topp preliminarily explored the relationship between the leaders of the Italian Socialist Federation and the wider Italian immigrant community. Topp reveals that within the pages of the ISF's major organ, *Il Proletario*, there were disparaging remarks directed at southern Italians—using the article on Africo as one example. According to the author, "the fact that articles portraying Southern

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The Italian American Left cannot be examined as a separate entity from radical movements generally within the United States, and must be seen in the context of radical movements internationally, most particularly in Italy. As Philip Cannistraro and Gerald Meyer have noted, the *sovversivi*, a label with which Italian authorities had branded Italian Leftist radicals from the 1860s until the fall of Fascism, operated within a certain political, social, and cultural milieu. In many ways this milieu paralleled the immigrant experience as a whole in that both domestic American history and transnational developments contributed to the shaping of Italian American radicalism.[219]

Since the late nineteenth century, Italian socialists and anarchists in the United States developed and maintained close ties with their comrades across the Atlantic. The transnational nature of the Italian Left was facilitated and nurtured by the frequent exchange of letters, as well as publications of journals and newspapers, and financial support, that presented an ideological front without borders. This trans-Atlantic

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Italians as backward and even barbaric appeared in *Il Proletario*, whether they were representative of views of most ISF members or not, made it clear that the syndicalists in the ISF were themselves somewhat alienated, if not from the land where they were born, then from the people they were seeking to organize." My examination of the Italian immigrant Left more forcefully demonstrates that the racial constructs of radical Italian leaders—both northern and southern Italian--reflected these views more widely than previously thought. See Michael A. Miller Topp, *Immigrant Culture and the Politics of Identity: Italian-American Syndicalists in the U.S., 1911-1927*, PhD Dissertation, Brown University, 1993, 60, now published in book form as *Those Without Country: The Political Culture of Italian American Syndicalists* (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis:2001).

[219]Philip V. Cannistraro & Gerald Meyer, "Introduction," in their edited volume *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism: Politics, Culture, and Labor*

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connection continued through the twentieth century as syndicalists and later, communists and anti-Fascists, would use similar methods. According to Cannistraro and Meyer, "it is possible, in fact, to speak of a 'radical chain migration' operating in both directions across the Atlantic—Italy supplied a continuing influx of radicals and ideas to the Little Italies, and in turn the radical elements in these communities often raised money for and supported causes back home."[220]

Italian American radicalism was not, however, identical to its Italian predecessor. Although the evolution of radicalism's main components—anarchism, socialism, syndicalism, communism—mirrored that of Italy, there were important circumstances particular to the United States that insured that the Italian American Left would have its own unique character. Supplementing this fact was that the Italian American colonies [as they were described during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century] remained isolated and provincial.

Although traditional studies of Italian immigrants ignored or denied the existence and strength of radical political ideology during the period of mass migration and thereafter,[221] recent scholarship has filled that void in Italian American history. During the period 1880 through 1920 thirty five million "new" immigrants from eastern and southern Europe, of which five million were Italian, entered the United States. Similar to other immigrant arrivals during this period, Italians did not speak English and were not

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(forthcoming, Praeger, 2003), 7-8.

[220]Cannistraro & Meyer, *The Lost World*, 8.

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Protestant. However, for various reasons Italians had the most difficult adjustment to make in the United States. Unlike Jewish immigrants, Italians arrived without a group of compatriots to advocate for them and provide services. Furthermore, not thought of as "white" by Americans—southern Italians were consistently described as "swarthy" and "between white and black"—Italians "experienced the most insistent and pervasive hostility."[222] As we have seen, the large majority of Italian immigrants originated from the *Mezzogiorno*--southern Italy--a region historically beset by woeful social and economic conditions, which actually worsened after Italian unification in 1860. The peasants, or *contadini*, endured under this oppressive environment that left them open to exploitation by large landowners. Living in isolated agrotowns, *contadini* experienced a plethora of social and economic ills such as poor health and nutrition, restricted access to education and limited income. Coupled with the Catholic Church's acquiescence and perpetuation of this exploitative and oppressive system, these circumstances led to a general rejection of liberalism and an inherent anticlericalism--more so among the men. Such economic and social conditions created an ideal milieu for radicalism.

In the decades following Italian unification, radical activity spread rapidly throughout areas of the Italian peninsula where economic and social conditions remained deplorable. Anarchists and socialists inspired activity among rural *contadini* and *artigiani* in north-central Italy as well as Naples and Sicily. Electoral statistics demonstrating that the Italian Socialist Party attracted only ten percent of the vote in the

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[221]See Gambino, *Blood of My Blood.*

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South in 1919, underestimate the impact of a radical influence due to the insistence on identifying radicalism with the urban proletariat. In Italy, the unionization of agricultural workers--the majority of those that would immigrate to the United States—would become prevalent. Socialist movements such as the Sicilian *Fasci dei Lavoratori*, comprised more than 300,000 activists and led to an uprising in 1893-94 which resulted in direct action and land seizures requiring some 40,000 troops to be sent to the island. Hence, the radical experience of Italian *contadini* and *artigiani*, just like immigrant racial consciousness, was partially formed before their arrival in the United States and transported with them as part of their political, social, and cultural baggage.[223]

It would be upon their arrival that immigrants would adapt and shape radical tendencies to their new American surroundings. One of the major differences between the Italian and American scenes was the relative strength of the anarchist movement in America in relation to Italy. Losing some of their primacy due to the founding of the Italian Socialist Party in 1892 in Italy, anarchists in America benefited from particularly unique American immigrant conditions. Given that the majority of Italian immigrants were not naturalized and hence not eligible to vote in 1910, an anarchist platform that rejected electoral politics and espoused direct revolutionary action had more of an appeal

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[222]Cannistraro & Meyer, 10.

[223]Contrary to some historical opinion that southern Italian immigration represented an alternative to radicalism, Donna Gabaccia has demonstrated that Sicilian "immigrants came from precisely those towns and those backgrounds where labor militancy enjoyed its greatest appeal . . . . and the most militant towns had the highest average migration rates." See Donna Gabaccia, "Neither Padrone Slaves nor Primitive Rebels: Sicilians on Two Continents," in Dirk Hoerder, ed., *'Struggle a Hard Battle':*

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to immigrants eager to return home as soon as possible. Therefore, Italian American anarchists were not marginalized, as they were in Italy, and with the leadership of activists such as Francesco Saverio Merlino, Pietro Gori, Errico Malatesta and Luigi Galleani, established influential newspapers such as *Il Grido degli Oppressi* in New York in 1892 and *La Questione Sociale* in Paterson in 1895.[224]

The Socialists were also active during the 1890s, establishing newspapers such as *Il Proletario*, which was founded in Pittsburgh in 1896. However, internecine strife plagued Italian American socialists--as it did the entire spectrum of *sovversivi*--as a major issue at the time was whether to join the Socialist Labor Party (SLP) or the Socialist Party of America (SPA). The issue was circumvented when Giacinto Menotti Serrati, an important party leader in Italy who had taken control of *Il Proletario* in 1902, established the Italian Socialist Federation, an organization that would remain independent from the SLP and the SPA. Internal struggle persisted between the revolutionary and reformist wings of the ISF. The revolutionary faction advocated electoral politics only as a means of eventually overthrowing the government through violent revolution. The reformist wing, mirroring the American socialist party, believed that bourgeois society could be changed through power at the ballot box.

The revolutionary faction came to constitute a large majority of the organization

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Essays on Working Class Immigrants (Northern Illinois Press, Illinois: 1986), 104-5.

[224] See Paul Avrich, *Sacco & Vanzetti: The Anarchist Background* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1991), *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1988); Nunzio Pernicone, *Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892* (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1993).

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as well as control its central organ, *Il Proletario*. Early in the twentieth century, the ideological conflict would be heightened by the rise of a new socialist movement, revolutionary syndicalism. Inspired by one of the most influential radical leaders of the era, Carlo Tresca, revolutionary syndicalism rejected political activism and advocated strikes, boycotts, and sabotage in order to provide syndicalist revolutions predicated upon workers organized in unions. Tresca's campaign was highly successful and aroused the class-consciousness of workers. Replacing Serrati as the director of *Il Proletario* in 1904, Tresca witnessed *Il Proletario's* circulation increase from 4,000 to 5,600, the number of sections of the ISF grow from 30 to 80, and many of ISF's members moving to the Industrial Workers of the World.[225]

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A vibrant radical culture emerged within the *colonia italiana* which reflected the particular concerns and issues of the immigrant community and provided an alternative to the dominant hegemonic values of the *prominenti*. Radicals created alternative worker holidays, such as May Day, to replace either religious or nationalistic holidays such as the Fourth of July. Radical culture was expressed through a series of institutions that included theaters, libraries, and schools. Without a doubt, however, the most important and pervasive vehicle for dissemination and circulation of *sovversivi* culture was the Italian language radical press. As Cannistraro and Meyer point out, the fact that in 1920s

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[225]See Nunzio Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," in *The Italians of New York: Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement*, Philip V.Cannistraro, ed., (Mondadori Printing S.p.A., 1999), pp. 77-79 and "Carlo Tresca's *Il Martello*," *Italian*

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New York one-third of the city's Italian-language circulation fell into the radical category "reflects two related facts: that while the illiteracy of Italian immigrants in general has been exaggerated, literacy was considerably higher among radicals...."[226] Radical newspapers such as the socialist *Il Proletario* and the anarchist *La Questione Sociale* contained not only political news and editorials, but excerpts from plays and novels, and information regarding lectures, music, and theatrical performances.

New York, with its ever-expanding Italian immigrant population during the years 1890 through 1920, became home to the largest and most active community of Italian immigrant radicals in the United States.[227] However, although this sub-culture thrived within Italian immigrant enclaves, radicals were still a minority of the Italian immigrant population.[228] Based on newspaper circulation, Nunzio Pernicone offers an estimate that calculates the strength of the *sovversivi* at ten thousand out of New York's population of approximately one million Italian Americans in the 1920s.[229] Rudolph Vecoli, although

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American Review, Volume 8, Number 1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 7-55.

[226]Cannistraro & Meyer, 22.

[227]Nunzio Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," 77.

[228]Little Italies, where the large majority of Italian immigrants lived, served as insulators--buffers--to the pervasive anti-Italian sentiment that greeted immigrants arrival. In so doing, they provided a much-needed insularity that allowed Italian immigrants to recreate familiar social patterns of their southern Italian villages. And, although some historians have pointed to this cultural isolation as a cause for a conservative outlook, what has been ignored is that the same set of circumstances fostered the growth and nurturing of radicalism brought from Italy and maintained in the United States. See Cannistraro & Meyer, 21.

[229]Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," note 1.

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warning that it would be a mistake to underestimate the role Italian American radicals played in organizing and inspiring Italian workers, recognizes that there were serious internal weaknesses within the radical movement that hindered its progress and recruitment within immigrant enclaves. Further, Vecoli acknowledges that the Italian radical movement faced serious resistance from the immigrant masses themselves, whom they perceived as illiterate, indifferent to organization, controlled by *prominenti* and priests, obsessed with work and money, and constantly moving to find work that undermined established socialist institutions.[230]

Notwithstanding the minority status of the radical Left within Italian immigrant communities, its influence lay in their passionate belief in political and social reforms that were antithetical to the ideology of a vast majority of their *connazionali*. According to Pernicone, "the record of the Italian immigrant Left should not be measured in quantitative terms of victories versus defeats. The legacy of the *sovversivi* lies in the very fact of their struggle for freedom, equality, and social justice. Judged on this basis, the *sovversivi* had no peers among the Italian immigrants and their American progeny."[231]

It was the radical press' incessant critique of the Italian Liberal state in the years after unification, as well as its assault on American capitalism (and closer to home the priests and the exploitative *prominenti*) that distinguished it from more mainstream

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[230]Rudolph J.Vecoli, "The Italian Immigrants in the United States Labor Movement from 1880 to 1929," in Bruno Bezza, ed., *Gli Italiani fuori d'Italia: Gli emigrati nei movimenti operai dei paesi d'adozione 1880-1940*. (F.Angeli, Milano: 1983), 274-75.

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vehicles, such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. In many ways, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano's*, idealized, romanticized view of Italy reflected the perception of many Italian immigrants during the period of mass migration. Only after settling in the United States did southern Italians look back nostalgically and create for themselves an Italian past that in many ways they had never experienced.[232] Further, noted George Pozzetta, *Il Progresso*, reflecting the views of the *prominenti*, consistently opposed reform within the Italian immigrant communities. When issues arose such as the formation of labor unions, independent political parties, or laws aimed at controlling immigrant banks and *padroni*, the paper would suddenly "become violently assertive of the status quo."[233] The creation, or re-organization, of an Italian identity, along with a variety of other factors, facilitated the path of "americanization" that *prominenti*, as well as the United States government, desperately desired. The radical press, therefore, with its constant critique of capitalism, nationalism, patriotism and *prominenti* exploitation, served as the lone bulwark against the process of americanization.

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[231]Pernicone, "Italian Immigrant Radicalism in New York," 77.

[232] Robert Orsi, "The Fault of Memory: 'Southern Italy' in the Imagination of Immigrants and the Lives of Their Children in Italian Harlem, 1920-1945," *Journal of Family History*, Volume 15, Number 2, 133-47. George Pozzetta maintained that, for all its shortcomings, the mainstream Italian language press in New York had the unintended effect of creating a growing sense of group identity in Italian America after 1900. According to Pozzetta, *Il Progresso's* reporting on colony activities, community projects involving all members, and defense of all things Italian, "weakened the bonds of *campanilismo* and helped to forge a unity that was completely alien to the old world . . . . In America these immigrants came to think of themselves increasingly as 'Italians' rather than *paesani* from a particular village or province." See Pozzetta, *The Italians of New York City*, 242-43.

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"From the eighteenth century to the present," notes Vecoli, "the United States has been held up as an example, positive or negative, by Italian reformers and revolutionaries."[234] In Vecoli's analysis, many radical intellectuals and peasants genuinely perceived the United States as the land of promise. The democratic idealism and liberalism that emerged from the American Revolution served to inspire the unification of Italy. Even a tainted past littered with the stains of African American slavery was forgiven after this "free country" had fought the Civil War to abolish the pernicious institution. However, and this is Vecoli's argument, once Italian immigrants, many of them radicals, began arriving in an industrializing United States their feelings and perceptions of America would drastically change. Critical of the exploitative nature of the capitalist system, Italian immigrant radicals felt betrayed by the country which they had so idealistically constructed. And, unlike their mainstream press counterparts, such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, which eventually abandoned criticism of all things Italian and American, for radicals the term "free country" assumed an ironic meaning. Scores of socialist and anarchist activists would incessantly critique American pretensions, institutions, and social conditions, as well as the plight of its working class.

Notwithstanding its critique of American capitalism, however, the Italian American Left was conflicted. Throughout the pages of anarchist papers such as *Il Grido degli Oppressi* and *La Questione Sociale*, as well as the Italian Socialist Federation's *Il*

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[233]Pozzetta, *The Italians of New York City*, 239.

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Proletario, criticism of bourgeois institutions and leaders was littered with the language of racial hierarchy. In their derision of political and social repression, colonialism, or the clergy, the Italian American *sovversivi* worked within much the same constructs of civilization and savagery that were prevalent in the mainstream Italian language press and closely connected to hierarchies of race. Within the pages *Il Proletario*, the organization Michael Miller Topp describes as the "focal point of the Italian-American Left's energies in the years before World War I," class issues were overtly privileged over those of race.[235] However, issues of civilization and savagery, and more particularly, which nations were perceived to be "members" of the pantheon of "civilized" nations, littered the pages of *Il Proletario* and the anarchist *La Questione Sociale*. Protesting against the unlawful imprisonment of their political allies in Italy, *Il Proletario* wondered how this could occur in the Italy of 1899: "Italy was barbarian, but now we do not occupy the last rung in the ladder of civilized nations."[236] In this sense, a belief in a hierarchy of civilized races, juxtaposed to those that were considered uncivilized, or savage/barbarian, was as much a part of the transnational nature of the Italian American left as the passage of political ideology from Italy to the United States. The turn of the century European notion that there existed primitive and civilized nations was a construct that consciously or unconsciously reflected socialist thought.

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[234]Vecoli, "'Free Country,'" 23.

[235]Michael Miller Topp, "The Italian-American Left: Transnationalism and the Quest for Unity," *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, Paul Buhle & Dan Georgakas, eds., (State University of New York Press: Albany, 1996), 119.

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Numerous examples within the pages of *La Questione Sociale* reveal how deeply immigrant anarchists had absorbed contemporary hierarchies of race. Topics ranging from religion to the nature of capitalist exploitation were discussed within the paradigm of civilization and savagery. The evils of capitalism were described in vivid imagery using the analogy of African cannibalism. *La Questione Sociale* declared that "we [meaning modern nations] are worse than the savages because we have a keenly developed intellect and should know better . . . . in the so called civilized countries and especially in those we inhabit the form of savage African cannibalism does not exist . . . . however, many people are still killed by the thousands in different ways every day.[237] For *La Questione Sociale*, low-wage laborers who toiled in mines for sixteen hours a day represented a more modern form of cannibalism than its counterpart in the "savage" world.

The Italian American Left also compared the behavior of Italian American religious masses to that of "African savages." One of the common themes behind the anti-clericalism of the immigrant Left was the exploitative nature of organized religion and the ignorant susceptibility of the masses that yearned to believe in supernatural beings. *La Questione Sociale* equated southern Italian immigrants' belief in priests as a form of infantile simple-mindedness that was not unique. "All tribes like the Zulu exhibit this sort of behavior. American Indians do not have a word that denotes God because

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[236]*Il Proletario*, May 10,1899.

[237]*La Questione Sociale*, October 27,1906.

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they do not wonder about the world's origin. Instead, they use objects without knowing about them, such as a baby would. If we ask a savage about the origins of the world they would answer with an infantile response. For example, when Queen Singa was asked by a missionary who made the world, she replied 'my ancestors,' just as a baby would answer 'my father,' to the question 'who made this building.'"[238] Although a critique against religion, the article illuminates how Italian American *sovversivi* perpetuated established hierarchies of civilization and savagery. By making comparisons to "savage" peoples--whether African or Native American--the radical press and *Il Progresso* both identified a grave concern that Western "civilization," if left unchecked, could slide down the ladder of racial hierarchies. The facility with which contemporaries adhered to such ideas speaks to the pervasiveness and rigidity of these categories among Europeans and Americans regardless of ideological bias.

Although the Italian American radical press did not actively promote such constructions of "civilization," nonetheless there are countless examples of its implicit, if not explicit, acceptance. Frequently principles such as "liberty," directly associated with free, democratic, and hence, "civil nations," were perceived to emanate from northern Europe and America.[239] The anarchist *Il Grido degli Oppressi* mocked the tainted accomplishments of Christopher Columbus in a scathing indictment of the man, as well as the Italian people who revered his image. "Rather than slavery and destruction to the Natives living in America, Columbus could have brought what is European civility to

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[238] *La Questione Sociale*, September 30, 1905.

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America and returned to Europe only what was superfluous of the natural wealth of the American land."[240] For the anarchists, therefore, the humanistic goal should have been "true" European civilization searching for natural resources, rather than "civilization" in the form of colonial expansion. The issue of which party in this dialogue was civilized and which was primitive was never in question. Similarly, *Il Proletario* held up the trope of primitive behavior to ridicule militarism and senseless killing among nations and peoples. In an idealistic critique of why "civilized" nations make war, the juxtaposition of perceived tenets of barbarism, such as cannibalism, were used to sarcastically deride militarism between nations. "When we speak of cannibalism, we smile with pride and say we are superior to the savages. But who are the true savages?"[241] However, in doing so, the paper clearly spoke to the belief in a hierarchy of civilization that was not only understood, but also accepted.[242] Parallel to the mainstream Italian language press' use of

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[239]*Il Proletario*, March 16,1899.

[240]*Il Grido degli Oppressi*, July 14,1892. Labeling Columbus the "symbol of ferocity for his period," *Il Grido degli Oppressi* continued its criticism of European colonialism stating that "the infantile passion of the savages for these bright, shiny objects, such as mirrors, became for the civilized man a desire for gold and power . . . . " In critiquing the relationship between colonizer and indigenous peoples, *Il Grido* still worked within racial hierarchies juxtaposing civilization and savagery. Ironically, their outrage at European colonial ventures is littered with acknowledgement that "civilized" people should know and act in a more humane manner--not necessarily that "native people" should not be treated this way at all. See *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, June 30,1892.

[241]*Il Proletario*, December 15,1900.

[242]The implicit understanding of civilized versus uncivilized was ubiquitous in a host of articles dealing with a variety of topics. Discussing the Russo-Japanese War, Carlo Tresca held France up as the "pioneering republic of civility." *Il Proletario*, April 16,1905.

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"savage" or "primitive" races, the radical press also rebuked the "civilized" behavior of Americans. Working under the assumption that the United States was a "civilized" country, the most effective means to denigrate its behavior was to compare it to races presumed "savage"--or outside the boundaries of "civilization." American racial intolerance prompted *Il Proletario* to exclaim that "America has given a message to the world that here, in the United States, we may consider ourselves free, but not yet civilized. We are at the same level as the barbarous and crude tattooed Indians, though we may tell ourselves that we are the superior race and that we will always fight for what is right, just and true."[243] Ironically, *Il Proletario* condemned racial intolerance by using the rigid categories of racial hierarchy that were more generally held at the time.

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A consistent critique of conditions in America revolved around the role of the clergy, especially within the Italian immigrant enclaves. Considered on par with the barons of capitalist industry such as Morgan and Rockefeller, the priests of the Catholic Church came under even more strident criticism for their ability to exploit from within. To the Left, the colony of "ignorant, illiterate, superstitious southern Italian immigrants" was an easy target for these religious swindlers. This critique provides insight into how the discussion of "civilization and savagery" was infused with specific meanings. An event that aroused the particular wrath of the Italian immigrant radicals was the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which took place in East Harlem, New York City. The feast

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[243] *Il Proletario*, April 8,1916.

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was a product of the traditions transferred from Italy to the United States during the immigrant excursion and revolved around the veneration of the patron Madonna of the particular region or town of origin in southern Italy. During these feasts, or *feste*, Italian immigrants would form a procession through the streets behind a statue of the Madonna, raising money for the local church where the statue was housed.[244] According to the *sovversivi*, spectacles such as these were a clandestine ruse designed to divest the Italian working class of its wages. However, from the perspective of the radicals the Italian American communities were not without fault. What becomes manifest from the Italian American Left's critique of the feast, is how the *sovversivi* perceived southern Italian immigrants, not only as a race, but also as a "civilized" people.

In the early twentieth century *sovversivi* frequently lashed out at the Italian American dailies in New York for their support of a "feast organized by a mass of criminals."[245] The anarchist *La Questione Sociale* ridiculed the Italian colony and the *Bolletino della Sera*, stating that "Italians above all people believe in miracles as if they were in the Middle Ages. . . . it is a conflict between ancient barbary and modern civilization."[246] The feast was described as a "festival of superstition, prejudice, and ignorance—a celebration of darkness in the middle of so much light, civility and

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[244]See Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*

[245]*Il Proletario*, July 21,1900.

[246]See *La Questione Sociale*, July 25,1903; see also similar comments regarding the medieval aspects of the Feast of La Madonna del Carmine from Paterson, New Jersey--a vibrant anarchist Italian colony. *La Questione Sociale*, July 27,1907.

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progress."[247] In a similar fashion to how *Il Progresso* described the "primitive" tribes of Africa, the immigrants were reviled as "savage people from the backcountry of Calabria and Sicily—without shoes, with long hair resembling witches more than human beings. . . ."[248] [Ironically, the same language was used in the mainstream Italian language press when describing Africans. The lack of shoes was perceived as an implicit measure of the "uncivilized" nature of Africans.][249] *Il Proletario* asked with incredulity if the "orgies and fantasies of the *pelli rosse* or the *ottentoti* could be any more inferior than the sad spectacle our Italian colony has offered us the last few days?"[250] As discussed in Chapter Five *Pelle rosse* is translated as "redskin," a term used frequently in both the mainstream and socialist press to refer to Native Americans. *Ottentoti* is derived from the Italian word *ottentotto*, meaning Hottentots, a language deriving from the Khoiskhoin peoples of South Western Africa and Namibia. The use of *Ottentoti* as a means to distinguish that which was "savage" from "civilized" persisted through the following decades of mass immigration. In 1915, *Il Proletario* used the same comparison to condemn Americans for their violent behavior towards African Americans. "This attack was in defense of property ownership and the victims were Black, however, the 'civil' people of society will say it was perpetrated 'without racism, without prejudice and was inspired by the

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[247]*Il Proletario*, July 19, 1902.

[248]*Il Proletario*, July 21,1900.

[249]See *Eco d'Italia*, March 26, 1896; *L'Araldo Italiano*, March 20, 1896.

[250]*Il Proletario*, July 21,1900.

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highest sense of humanitarianism. If this is civility I would prefer to associate myself with the Hottentots of the Congo."[251]

Along with their ideological aversion to the Catholic church, the *sovversivi's* disdain for southern Italian peasants speaks to their embarrassment over behavior which they could describe only in comparison to "inferior, primitive" people. As Ian Haney-Lopez has argued, constructing a standard of civilized behavior or culture, implicitly or explicitly, necessitates the creation of its mirror opposite in order to differentiate between the two, as well as exclude and include accordingly.[252]

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The European concept of Africa, and more specifically central Africa, as a primitive, savage, dark, country where civilization had not yet encroached, permeated the pages of Italian language mainstream newspapers. As delineated in Chapter 3, Italian immigrant consciousness of Africa was informed before immigrants arrived in the United States. Perceptions of African "savagery" were not only prevalent in more mainstream outlets such as *Il Progresso*, but were upheld in the Italian American Left's publications.

Criticizing the Reverend George Cutter of Boston for arguing that the criminally insane and the mentally or physically disabled should be prohibited from procreating in order to purify the race, *Il Proletario* sarcastically noted: "He [Reverend Cutter] is fortunate that for his comments he has a forum like America which is the land of the

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[251] *Il Proletario*, September 4,1915.

[252] Haney-Lopez, 28-29.

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cowboys, where civilization is on par with the barbarians of equatorial Africa."[253] In this example, the attempt to defend marginalized people from racial purification theories is paralleled by maintenance of African "savagery" as the measure with which to judge "civilized" peoples.[254] After the fatal shooting of Giovanni Bazzani, a young Italian boy who mistakenly trespassed onto a farm in Clinton, Indiana, *La Questione Sociale* used this "unpardonable crime" to outline the evils of private property in the United States. In its outrage, *La Questione Sociale* complained, "Is this how American farmers defend their property? These crimes are so atrocious that they would horrify and disgust even savage beasts from central Africa."[255]

For the Italian immigrant Left, one of the major events that would illuminate the perception of Africa as "primitive and savage" was the seizure by the Italian government

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[253]*Il Proletario*, June 2,1911. Common references to Africa as "savage" were present in *Il Proletario*. In one article students on horseback from Harvard were criticized for creating a slight melee after an altercation occurred between a prostitute and the police. *Il Proletario* stated that the students on horseback resembled the "conquistadors of savage Africa." *Il Proletario*, March 1,1912.

[254]In addition to outright comparisons associating "savage" Africans with southern Italians, for example, there was also the tendency to use Africans metaphorically in order to illuminate a point. For instance, in an article criticizing the *prominenti*-owned Italian language press in New York, *Il Proletario* maintained that these newspapers were vehicles for exploitation and prostitution and exclaimed in disgust that *prominenti* newspapers were full of such grotesque nonsense that "not even a Zulu would accept it." Clearly, the assumption is that members of the Zulu nation were primitive, uncivilized barbarians who symbolize the essence of simplicity. In a patronizing comparison, *Il Proletario* holds up the example of the Zulu to demonstrate just how ridiculous the propaganda present in the mainstream Italian language press was. *Il Proletario*, October 28,1916.

[255]*La Questione Sociale*, November 26,1904.

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of Libya in 1911-1912. Since the end of the nineteenth century, Italian leaders viewed the colonization of Africa as a possible outlet for the millions of Italians who were migrating from Italy. After the prospect of colonizing Ethiopia ended abruptly with the defeat of the Italians at Adowa in 1896, an opportunity to avenge this disaster emerged when Italy invaded Tripoli at the end of 1911. As it did in the late nineteenth century, the recently unified Italian Liberal State felt the need to assert itself on the stage of geo-political imperialism. Although part of the Triple Alliance with Austria-Hungary and Germany, the Italian leaders were aware of their nation's relative lack of power and wealth compared to its neighbors. Therefore, late to the table of territorial acquisitions, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti resuscitated the Italian campaign for Africa by targeting one of the only remaining areas of Africa to which Italy might possibly lay claim.

Although Libya was a desert and not very fertile, one of the primary motivations of the colonialists was the hope that this new colony would provide an area of settlement for the vast number of poverty stricken southern Italians. Italian nationalists hoped that once Libya was an Italian possession the tide of southern Italian migration would be re-routed closer to home rather than continuing their journey to New York or Buenos Aires. In 1905 Italy had begun a policy of peaceful economic penetration into Libya and slowly created an uncomfortable situation for the Ottoman Turks who ruled the territory. Creating a situation where Italian business interests would seem to need protection, it was the apparent assassination of two Italian officials working in Tripoli in the fall of 1911 that set off a military conflict. Despite the fact that the war remained at a stalemate for

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months, Italy achieved its aim by default. Benefiting from the Ottoman Empire's increasing weakness, in July 1912 the Turks and Italians negotiated a peace settlement. On October 8,1912, with the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne, Italy formally annexed Libya.

The Italian immigrant Left immediately denounced the war for Libya as an effort by the Italian state to extend the economics of capitalism. The *sovversivi* attempted to expose the false rhetoric imperialist Italy used as a rationale for the invasion, namely to "civilize" the inhabitants of Libya. Instead, *sovversivi* such as Arturo Giovannitti argued that the goal of capitalist nations was never to civilize the countries it invaded, but rather to capture territory for its own ends.[256] The Italian American Left created a dialogue that upbraided the Italian government for attempting to "civilize" Libya instead of solving its "southern problem" at home.[257] The *sovversivi*'s response to the Italian conquest of Libya provides fertile ground for the discussion of concepts such as "civilization and savagery," as well as the Italian immigrant Left's perception of Africa.

In the patriotic and influential Italian journal, *Tribuna Illustrata*, an article appeared in 1912 pertaining to the village of Africo. The journal speculated that the village may have been inhabited by the descendants of African slaves that were captured and had escaped during the reign of the Roman empire. In establishing this premise, the article differentiated "traditional" Italian customs from village practices such as burying

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[256]Giovannitti quoted in Topp, *Immigrant Culture*, 39-40.

[257]For a general discussion and explanation of the origins and relevance of the "southern question" see Chapter 2.

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and excavating pigs before eating them, stealing sheep, or begging in the streets. The journal held all of these habits as unfamiliar to Italians. Writing for *Il Proletario*, Leonardo Frisina excerpted parts of this article in an effort to vindicate socialists from the criticism they encountered when they argued that "in Calabria there still existed barbarous and savage villages."[258] Frisina sarcastically noted that the views that had been brushed aside willy-nilly as the rant of political extremists, could no longer be ignored now that they appeared in the "patriotic" journal *Tribuna Illustrata*. An attack against the misdeeds of the Italian government's attempt to colonize Libya, Frisina argued that Italian governmental resources could be better spent at home. In doing so, *Il Proletario* revealed a perception of Africa that was very similar to that of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. Criticizing the patriotic and self aggrandizing habits of the Italian government, and in particular the *Tribuna Illustrata*(a paper that the socialists perceived as a government subsidized mouthpiece), *Il Proletario* stated that "if Darwin could show in 1912 that Africans in Calabria were nearer to orangutans than Adam and Eve, this demonstration still would not satisfy the *Tribuna Illustrata* because they must always adhere to the notion that Italy is a civilized country."[259]

Attempting to expose the hypocrisy of the Italian government's colonial excursions, *Il Proletario* played an interesting game of logic. In an effort to condemn the jingoistic patriotism of a journal such as *Tribuna Illustrata*, they conveyed an acceptance of the Italian belief of African as "uncivilized." "Never would they [*Tribuna Illustrata*]

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[258] *Il Proletario*, April 19,1912.

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say there are uncivilized people in Italy . . . . In fact, when there are feasts these African people sell our sons and daughters into slavery to rich people . . . . we suggest that *Tribuna Illustrata* advise the Italian government to spend more money to civilize Africans in Italy, rather than spending it in Tripoli."[260] To *Il Proletario* "African" was equivalent to primitive, since it appeared that Africa was the litmus test by which savagery should be measured.

The perception of Africa as an "uncivilized"[261] place that denoted primitive existence in the "modern" world of the twentieth century, served as a frequent backdrop for the *sovversivi*'s disgust with capitalism in general, the imperialistic ventures of the Italian government, and southern Italians themselves. Denouncing all forms of blind jingoist patriotism as propaganda to keep the population ignorant or diverted from their miserable plight, *Il Proletario's* criticism of the Italian government's inability, and seeming unwillingness, to "civilize" southern Italians resembled a subtle embarrassment over certain "kinds" of Italians. "Why is Italy going to Tripolitana when it can bring civility to Italy first . . . . It appears that the primitive tribes are happy the way they are as opposed to southern Italians who are miserable."[262]

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[259]Ibid.

[260]Ibid.

[261]In many articles the Italian word "tenebrosa" was attached to descriptions of Africa. Similar to the mainstream Italian language press, particularly *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, the word, meaning dark, obscure, sinister, was often used as the adjective to describe the "primitive" African continent. See *Il Proletario*, March 24,1917.

[262]*Il Proletario*, January 5,1912.

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In an effort to denounce Italian colonialism and the Italian government, *Il Proletario* established that within southern Italian regions such as Sicily, there existed people so "primitive and uncivilized" that only a comparison to Africans would suffice to explain. Reverting to a familiar theme, *Il Proletario* described the actions of the "devoted imbeciles" from Catania (Sicily) as they celebrated the feast of Saint Alfio. Familiar descriptions connoting "uncivilized" behavior emerged,, such as people proceeding through the streets with little clothes on, barefoot, and some licking the pavement as a symbol of devotion. "We have seen things there that you can only equate with things you would see with tribes in the indigenous Congo." According to *Il Proletario*,

> Many of these people go to the feast at midnight and the men and women begin by walking completely nude except for a small piece of red cloth that barely covers their private areas. They run through main avenues of the city like this just to try and obtain miracles. Ha! If a foreigner would see us! Surely, they wouldn't think to find this behavior in Italy, not even Tripoli, but probably it would be expected more from the cannibals of central Africa. They shriek and act like Indians.[263]

Once again, Indians and Africans are lumped together as symbols of the "savage" half of the dichotomous "civilization/savagery" construct. Much like their opponents in the mainstream Italian language press, the Italian Socialist left constructed an image of Africa as "primitive." Michael Miller Topp has argued that the Left's critique of the Italian ruling class was effective on one level because it exposed their fallacious rhetoric regarding "civilizing" Tripoli. However, he further notes that articles such as Frisina's

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[263]Ibid.

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could very easily extend this critique to racially disparage southern Italians.[264] What Topp does not explore is how the Italian radical critique of southern Italians is constantly informed by contemporary categories of racial hierarchy which position Africa as "uncivilized, primitive, and savage." The *sovversivi's* frequent negative comparisons of southern Italians to Africans illustrated the belief that African, and hence, black, "savagery" was the most graphic representation of "primitive" incivility in the world.

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After his assassination in 1901, *La Questione Sociale* viscerally attacked President William F. McKinley, who was shot by an avowed anarchist. After all, McKinley was the unrepentant imperialist who stole Spanish land and worse, spilled Spanish blood. He was the willing cohort and partner to exploitative capitalist institutions and men. According to *La Questione Sociale*,

> In the country where Abraham Lincoln was killed it is only right that McKinley was killed. Even though both Presidents presided over a war there was an incredible difference between the two . . . . Lincoln represented the American democratic republic. He came from humble beginnings as a woodcutter and eventually became a very intellectual figure. Lincoln was a martyr because he defended the abolition of Negro slavery. And when he died, Lincoln said he could die happy because he freed one and a half million human beings.[265]

Il Proletario speculated that Lincoln would be critical of American imperialist forays into

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[264]Topp, *Immigrant Culture*, Chapter 3, especially 58-61.

[265]*La Questione Sociale*, October 26,1901.

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the Philippines. Describing "poor Lincoln" as the man "who gave so much to redeem blacks from slavery," the paper surmised that Lincoln would have been saddened to see "his descendants subjugate people fighting for their own independence."[266] Lincoln was often invoked by Italian American *sovversivi* as the moral yardstick by which American behavior should be measured and the anniversary of his birthday usually elicited mention in the radical press.[267] The Italian American Left's glorification and admiration of Lincoln is symbolic of how the *sovversivi* constructed their own racial consciousness in the United States. In their idealized image of Lincoln, Italian American radicals demonstrated an understanding of the racial injustices faced by African Americans in the United States, yet did so in a conflicted manner. Within the discussion of race, slavery, and the plight of African Americans, Italian American *sovversivi* continually labeled the "Negro problem" not one of race, but of class.

When an eleven-year-old African American boy refused to salute the American flag at his school in Des Moines, Iowa, because the flag did not represent his race, but rather was a symbol of white oppression over Blacks, *Il Proletario* commended the act of bravery. "Hallowed words, don't you agree . . . . issued from the mouth of a young boy in defiance of the arrogance with which Americans believe in their country's representation

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[266]*Il Proletario*, February 16,1899.

[267]In February 1904 the anarchist *La Questione Sociale* noted that Americans were hypocritical to commemorate Lincoln if the values of capitalist America were against what Lincoln stood for. See *La Questione Sociale*, February 20,1904. For other articles dealing with the martyred Lincoln see *Il Proletario*, July11,1914; *Il Proletario*, July 17,1915.

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of all humanity . . . . words that should and could be found on the mouths of many black men . . . . who are treated like animals of the lowest species."[268] The precarious racial position occupied by African Americans was something, not only acknowledged in the radical press, but also critiqued within a specific leftist paradigm. This model was one of sympathy with racial injustices afflicting Blacks, but disagreement as to the root causes of why African Americans were an oppressed minority.

Il Proletario regularly privileged racial categories over class. When the National Association of Stationary Engineers voted unanimously to prevent African American machinists from becoming members of the union, the Italian socialists stressed the influence of racial prejudice rooted in skin color as a determining factor behind bigoted actions. According to *Il Proletario*, "isn't the Black worker taken advantage of more than the white . .. . Black work is beneficial to society just as much as whites. No—the Black is Black."[269] At times, the Italian American radical press was filled with caustic comments that attempted to reveal the hypocrisy of American values and actions regarding African Americans. In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt's White House lunch with African American leader Booker T.Washington, sent shock waves throughout many parts of the country, especially the white South. *La Questione Sociale* commented that ignorant Americans would prefer that the President "had invited rich aristocrats that suck the blood from laboring classes rather than this educated black man."[270] A thorough

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[268]*Il Proletario*, April 8,1916.

[269]*Il Proletario*, September 13,1902.

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analysis of the Italian American radical press reveals an even more complex perspective on race. As an examination of the mainstream Italian language papers discussed in previous chapters, the threat and occurrence of lynching was a pernicious daily reality to African Americans. For *La Questione Sociale*, the lynching of African Americans was a "shameful and cowardly" affront to American civilization.[271] However, even this symbolic display of racial hatred and brutality was categorized not under the heading of race hate, but class oppression. What is interesting is how *Il Proletario* used the language of racial stereotypes--the sort often present in white southern newspapers and literature--to buttress its argument that class oppression underpinned mob violence and lynching. In 1900 the paper argued that despite attempts by some in the federal government to pass legislation that would provide remuneration to the families of victims of lynching, it could not prevent these savage acts from occurring. The argument was couched within the framework of a class analysis. According to *Il Proletario*, it would be almost impossible to remedy the evil of lynching since it is "the most horrible consequence of tyrannical capitalism in this country."[272] However, in its suggestion as to why this task

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[270]*La Questione Sociale*, November 9,1901. See also *Il Proletario*, November 16,1901.

[271]For reporting of African American lynchings see *La Questione Sociale*, August 2,1902, March 23,1907. In 1899, shortly after the lynching of five Italians in Tallulah, Louisiana, *Il Proletario* called upon all Italians in the United States to support an organization called The National Anti-mob and Lynch Law Association. The purpose of this support would be to "vindicate our countrymen who were barbarically lynched in the South and West and to prevent other similar atrocities...." See *Il Proletario*, August 12,1899.

[272]*Il Proletario*, May 5,1900. There are many other examples in which Italian

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would be impossible. *Il Proletario* laid the responsibility at the feet of the victims. "As long as barbarian negroes unleash their anger suppressed during slavery by raping young girls and Italians come to this country to sell their labor at low prices and make justice with a knife--the popular furor of summary justice will continue."[273]

Although this statement overtly attempted to position African Americans as victims of slavery's brutal effects, *Il Proletario*, either consciously or subconsciously, sustained the popular racist stereotype that characterized African American men as "uncontrollable beasts desirous of white women." This was the most popular rationale offered by white southerners in their futile attempt to explain the lynching of Blacks. Concurrently, in reference to southern Italian immigrants, *Il Proletario* repeated a common refrain of many contemporary nativists about the "inherently violent" nature of southern Italians, especially Sicilians. In both cases, racial stereotypes were utilized in order to uphold a class-based rationale for lynching in the United States. At other times more subtle inferences were made which demonstrated this "schizophrenic" racial consciousness—a progressive worldview based upon class solidarity littered with the contemporary prejudices of racial hierarchy. In 1902 *La Questione Sociale* excoriated the Italian "scabs" who allowed themselves to be used by owners to break a railroad strike in

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American socialists reduced racial attacks such as lynching to acts of class warfare. After the brutal lynching of a black man in Colorado in 1900, a disgusted *Il Proletario* described how the townspeople rejoiced as the young black man was burned at the stake for allegedly violating a white girl. However, in its commentary, rather than castigate a racial caste system that had allowed this type of behavior, *Il Proletario* chose to direct its ire at churches and priests. See *Il Proletario*, November 24,1900.

[273] *Il Proletario*, May 5,1900.

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New York and Connecticut. The Italian anarchists, on the other hand, 'praised' the example of Black union workers who prevented a company from rounding up Black "scabs" in Alabama. The paper lamented: "The poor sons of our country are worse than most of the Blacks in Alabama![274]" The ironic suggestion that Italians had something to learn about solidarity from Black workers is partially undermined by the paper's shock that the Italian race needed to look to American Blacks to learn the tenets of union organization. The exclamation point at the end of the sentence is only buttressed by the headline of the article which reads: "Al Disotto dei negri!" or "Below[Inferior to] the Negroes!"[275]

The racially charged issue of slavery, still fresh in the minds of many Americans at the start of the twentieth century, offers another window through which issues of Italian American radical ideology regarding race can be examined. Equating Italian immigrant workers to that of African American slaves prior to the Civil War, terms such as "wage slavery" were used to illustrate the brutal conditions that prevailed in the new industrial

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[274]*La Questione Sociale*, March 29,1902

[275]Ibid. In an article on the "anarchist education" that outlined how to teach, as well as make people conscious of their rights, *La Questione Sociale* maintained that one must be patient when trying to "teach" wives. Indeed, one "must remember that African slaves did not know what to do with their freedom after their emancipation and were quite embarrassed by it. Then, little by little, they believed it was better to live in freedom rather than remain slaves forever . . . . " The assumption that African slaves could not understand freedom because their natural state was slavery speaks to the facile manner in which Italian *sovversivi* could employ the discourse of racial hierarchy. It is remarkably similar to the wider Italian American consciousness outlined in Chapter 3 that positions America as a civilizing nation capable of "teaching" African slaves about liberty and freedom. See *La Questione Sociale*, January 6,1900

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economy.[276] However, although privileging a class analysis of the roots of "wage slavery," the Italian immigrant Left frequently lapsed into racial explanations to account for what they termed the "new slavery."

In September 1900 *Il Proletario* published a series of articles that pertained to the conditions faced by Italian immigrants lured to Hawaii in hopes of work and forced to labor under conditions of peonage. At first, Japanese workers, who after realizing the nature of the exploitive situation refused all further opportunities, performed the labor. Thereafter, it was Italian immigrants who were lured by promises of good wages. According to *Il Proletario*, the work was offered to Italians because the owners knew "that the Italian is ignorant and docile." In describing the nature of this exploitive labor arrangement *Il Proletario* declared that "the treatment Italians receive in Hawaii is no different from that which Blacks received before the Civil War . . . . It is slavery. The very slavery that United States law abolished but still exists in the traditions and customs of inhumane and avaricious owners."[277] Italian American *sovversivi* drew a continuous line from the sort of slavery that existed before the Civil War to the contemporary

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[276]David Roediger has explored how the issue of slavery was negotiated by antebellum white workers and how terms such as "white slavery" and "wage slavery" were implicit in the effort by white workers to compare themselves to Black slaves while simultaneously distancing themselves from the institution. According to Roediger, "Chattel slavery provided white workers with a touchstone against which to weigh their fears and a yardstick to measure their reassurance. An understanding of both the stunning process by which some white workers came to call themselves slaves and the tendency for metaphors concerning white slavery to collapse thus takes us to the heart of the process by which the white worker was made." See Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness*, 66.

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paradigms of wage slavery that modern capitalists employed. In each instance, unequal power relations led to the enslavement of one class of the population for the financial betterment of the other. In fact, the "old" slavery was abolished, not through any pressure from abolitionists or anti-slavery politicians, but rather because the system became "useless to capitalists." Wage slavery was perceived as "much more advantageous" to the capitalists than the old form of slavery which targeted only Blacks: "now capitalist owners could augment their pool of workers by enslaving whatever color people they wanted."[278]

African American slaves were viewed as part of a paternalistic social web whereby white slave owners "looked after their slaves" in order to maintain productivity.[279] The fact that "modern" slaves were equal under the law, unlike African Americans prior to the 14th Amendment, prompted Italian American radicals to believe a more pernicious system of slavery existed in the modern era. "Today, we are all equal in front of the law, but it was better to be a slave without any worry for the future than to be a free worker now . . . . the conditions of the new slavery are worse than before . . . . There are Italian immigrants from the North and South living in 'shanties.' These people are so miserable and downtrodden that they cannot rebel."[280] In 1906, Carlo Tresca, at the time the editor of *Il Proletario*, scolded Italian American labor agents—*padroni*—

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[277]*Il Proletario*, September 20,1900.

[278]*La Questione Sociale*, June 6,1900.

[279]*Il Proletario*, July 25,1914.

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who misled Italian immigrant workers to the South with false ideas of prosperity. As opposed to other forms of slavery, Tresca condemned worker exploitation as the most heinous form and declared that "the form of slavery created by the bourgeoisie is the worst kind of slavery."[281] The geographical focus of the article was the American South, offering an interesting frame of reference which contrasted more sharply with Tresca's perception of African American slaves and those whom he consistently referred to as "Italian slaves in the south." These perceptions were buttressed by the conditions in which Italian immigrant workers often found themselves. *Il Proletario* pondered, "don't they[Italian workers] realize that they are treated worse than slaves to whom at least food and shelter were provided?"[282]

The contextual framework Italian American *sovversivi* constructed which contrasted the brutal conditions of the wage slave with those experienced years before by African Americans enabled the *sovversivi* to illustrate the conditions Italian immigrant workers encountered. However, although holding the system of capitalism, and its attendant overseers, as the primary culprits behind both the "old" and the "new" slavery, the Italian American Left could not avoid recognizing the role race played in this system of exploitation. Employing an "unconsciousness" of race, Italian American radicals worked within contemporary hierarchies of racial categories to differentiate between wage slavery and antebellum Black slavery. What is meant by an "unconsciousness" of

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[280]Ibid.

[281]*Il Proletario*, April 1,1906.

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race is that although Italian American *sovversivi* consistently reduced issues to a class analysis, they also included in the radical press a subconscious discussion of race. Therefore, while upholding statements such as those which declared "racial prejudice" did not exist in the United States, distinctions based upon race were frequently present in the press. These instances, in effect, demonstrate that although Italian American radicals did not ideologically operate within racial differences, they "unconsciously" accepted the existence of racial categories.[283] According to *Il Proletario*:

> Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865, but is still practiced under the American flag. I am not rhetorically using the word slaves either--people are bought and sold; brought to places under armed guard and are prevented from escaping by threat of the gun. For one thing, the new slavery is not the same as 35 years ago--the slaves are no longer Africans taken from their land and brought here. Rather, the new slaves are white, caucasian, and European.[284]

Although the article concluded by emphasizing that the proprietors of slaves were business trusts, its class analysis is belied by the most important distinction between the "old" and "new" slavery, which was one of race. One could speculate that attempts to utilize Black slaves as a benchmark with which to measure the poor working conditions of Italian immigrants, simultaneously necessitated a process of distancing from those very same people. *Il Proletario's* declaration that the "new" slaves were not only white, but also Caucasian and European, demonstrated an implicit acceptance of contemporary

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[282]*Il Proletario*, January 13,1900.

[283]For some examples of how racial distinctions were made in *Il Proletario*, see Jan. 11,1902; June 26,1904; June 26,1904.

[284]*Il Proletario*, May 5,1900.

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racial hierarchies which linked white and European, as well as an understanding that Italian immigrants should not be perceived as completely interchangeable with African American slaves.

Unlike their counterparts in the mainstream press, Italian *sovversivi* consistently railed against the efforts of capitalism, and by extension, capitalist agents such as *padroni*, *prominenti*, and clergy, to exploit the immigrant working classes. The Left's critique of America's capitalist exploitation of workers insured that the capitalist agenda would not go unchallenged. And, at its very core this challenge was simultaneously being waged against all efforts to "Americanize,"—or, in a sense, whiten—these 'undesirable' immigrants.[285] However, the defense of Leftist principles was frequently couched in a language of racial hierarchy that in many ways betrayed the very goals of the radical movement.[286] What Michael Miller Topp described as the "ambiguous relationship" between members of the ISF and southern Italian immigrant workers can effectively extend to the entire spectrum of the Italian American Left.[287]

The *sovversivi's* often critical perception of southern Italians as "ignorant or "savage," cannot be understood without a thorough examination of how Italian American

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285 See Chapter 6 on this issue.

[286]See Chapter 2, especially 58-61 & Chapter 3, 101-105, Topp, *Immigrant Culture*; also Elizabetta Vezzosi, "Class, Ethnicity, and Acculturation in *Il Proletario*: The World War One Years," in Christiane Harzig & Dirk Hoerder, eds., *The Press of Labor Migrants in Europe and North America 1880s to 1930s* (Bremen, Labor Newspaper Preservation Project, 1985), 443-458.

[287]Topp, *Immigrant Culture*, 60-61.

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Radicals viewed, as well as constructed, contemporary categories of race. Probing deep beneath the rhetoric of Italian immigrant radicals, what emerges is not only the ongoing dispute between northern Italians and their counterparts from the *Mezzogiorno*, but an image of Africans, and other darker skinned peoples, as "uncivilized and savage." When *sovversivi* needed to convey their disgust over the "uncivilized" behavior of Italian immigrants who participated in religious processions on the streets of Little Italies, it was the "cannibals of Africa" who provided the lowest common denominator. When Italian American radicals criticized the Italian government's capitalistic invasion of Libya, it was the image of an "uncivilized" region of southern Italy known as Africo—populated by the descendants of African slaves--that was utilized to expose lies about venturing to Libya in order to "civilize" the people.

Examining the *sovversivi's* use of racial imagery and language complicates the question of Italian immigrant racial consciousness in America by demonstrating that racial constructs and categories of "civilization" and "savagery" were not exclusive to one ideology. Italian American radicals were not immune from incorporating contemporary racial hierarchies in the progressive politics of the working class movement. By examining these images, a more nuanced and complicated analysis of Italian immigrant race consciousness emerges—one that speaks to not only the transnational nature of racial constructs, but to the powerful and ever evolving character of racial categories in the United States.

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Chapter 5

"Redskins" and the "Yellow Race": Native Americans, Asian Immigrants, and Italian American Constructions of a Multi-layered Racial Consciousness

Italian American racial consciousness did not exist in a vacuum—only pertaining to African Americans—but rather its complexity was manifest by the myriad racial hierarchies formulated while in America. One aspect of this construct was the concept of "civilization' and its effect on various races. The measure of civilization and savagery was an important determinate for Italian Americans when classifying races. Themselves defined as non-white by American political jurisdictions, as well as legal statutes, Italians wrestled with this characterization incessantly while in America. Their constant assertions that as Italians they hailed from a "civilized" culture—as opposed to Africans—was in sharp contrast to American racial typographies which placed southern Europeans as a distinct race from northern European—white—Anglo-Saxon peoples. The connection between northern European— white—and civilized is clear. As Ian Haney-Lopez has observed in her discussion of the prerequisite cases which put racial restrictions on citizenship, "Whites fashion an identity for themselves that is the positive mirror image of the negative identity imposed on people of color." Further, quoting Toni Morrison, she suggests, "[I]n order for the concept of a white race to exist, there must be a Black race which is everything the white race is not(read of course: does not want to be

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associated with)."[288]

However, in the Italian American mind, categories of race, color, and civilization did not always work together in a uniform fashion, but rather operated as a set of overlapping influences, either independent of one another, or in combination. Thus, Italian Americans saw American civilization as having enabled African Americans to transcend the status of their African descendants and climb the ladder of civilized races, even though they were still identified by contemporary thinking of race as non-white. Therefore, the transformative effects of American "civilization" took precedence over the categories of race and color in measuring a culture's standing in the socially constructed scale of superiority. It will be demonstrated in this Chapter how for many Italian Americans exposure to "civilization" was the crucial factor lifting African Americans above Native Americans, even though both were described as non-white.

Further, an examination of the Italian American reaction to the Chinese and Japanese illustrates that the perceived effects of America's "civilizing" power was not the only sieve through which Italian Americans filtered racial data. In her comparison of Italian and Chinese labor, Donna Gabaccia has offered a paradigm which extends beyond tracing racial categories to the power of paired dichotomies. According to Gabaccia, "The dichotomy of 'free' and 'unfree' labor remained a powerful influence as native-born laborers confronted new groups of migratory laborers in the nineteenth century, enabling them to collapse a wide variety of labor systems into the racially charged categories of

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[288]Haney Lopez, 27-29.

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'slavery.' At the same time, however, the racial categories that emerged from 'slavery' failed to transform all unfree workers into 'blacks' although they reserved the label 'white' for those few workers who performed free, waged labor. The creation of a third and overlapping 'yellow/olive/swarthy' category existed uneasily in a world divided simplistically between 'free' and 'unfree' labor."[289]

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In the late nineteenth century the American Far West elicited romantic visions in the European imagination, and especially in the Italian mind. The great plains of the United States represented virgin lands that had been conquered by the army of "progress," leaving behind the remnants of a dwindling Native American population. Italians made strong connections between this form of "manifest destiny"—the American equivalent of the European "white man's burden"—and contemporary colonial excursions into Africa undertaken by their government. In 1889 William Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill, heightened this fascination when he brought his traveling Wild West show to Europe. His show attracted large crowds in France as he appeared that year at the Paris Exposition, stirring great popular interest of the American Indian. In 1890 his itinerary led him to Naples, Italy, where he arrived with Indians, horses, and teepees to give the *lazzaroni* of Naples—the lumpenproletariet—a taste of the "savage West."[290]

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[289]Donna Gabaccia, "The 'Yellow Peril' and the 'Chinese of Europe': Global Perspectives on Race and Labor, 1815-1930," in Jan Lucassen and Leo Lucassen, eds., *Migration, Migration History, History: Old Paradigms and New Persepctives*, (Peter Lang, Berne: 1997), 195-196.

[290]Marcello Venturoli, *La Patria di marmo: Tutta la storia del Vittoriano, il*

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After Naples, Cody took his show to Rome, where his arrival was widely anticipated. Immense traffic jams developed throughout Italy's capital city as thousands of carriages tried to make their way to the Monte Mario district in an effort to capture a glimpse of the makeshift Indian village constructed for the show. For the Italian middle class in general, Buffalo Bill—a man renowned for his military victories against American Indians—represented a hero of their own kind, American equivalent of Italian King Victor Emmanuel II or folk hero Giuseppe Garibaldi. To Italians, Buffalo Bill symbolized not only the romantic notions of expansion and adventure, in this particular case expansion Westward, but also the triumph of "civilization over barbarism." After all, Buffalo Bill had brought "progress" to the West in the form of postal delivery, he blazed trails westward before railroads had simplified matters, and most importantly had withstood the constant danger of Indian violence. The romance attached to these heroics clearly resonated with the Italian "civilizing" mission underway in Africa. Indeed, the moral of the Wild West show was clear to the audience--that the white man was invincible and good and the forces of nature ordain the advance of civilization and progress against the insidiousness of barbarians.

The image of the Native American in the Italian mind corresponded with the idea of the 'noble savage," who, despite inherent racial inferiority, still maintained dignity and honor in their savagery. In Italy, bourgeois opinions felt that exposure to Buffalo Bill's depiction of the West would quiet discontent among peasants and workers, who would be

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monumento piu' discusso dell'eta' umbertina, tra arte, spettacoli, invenzioni, scandali e duelli (Newton Compton editori, Rome:1995), 130-133.

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able to compare their plight favorably to that of the Native Americans. Conversely, the working class audience at these shows repeatedly identified with the "noble savages" out of a sense of shared oppression. In the context of this Manichean construct, the parameters of "civilization" and "savagery" were clearly delineated with regard to the racial status of Native Americans. As in the case of the African American, this consciousness of the Indian did not develop after immigration to the United States, but, as suggested by the popularity and success of Buffalo Bill's traveling "wild West" show, had already been formed in Italy.[291]

In 1891 *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* gave wide coverage to a "sad" account of two young Italian immigrants fighting in the United States' 7th Cavalry Regiment at Fort Sill, Indian Territory, Oklahoma. The information came via one of the two Italians, a man named Alfonso Lauriano. Along with Francesco Schetti and the rest of the 7th Regiment, Lauriano was involved in a battle with Native Americans in this region. According to the article, the "*Pelle Rosse*," or "red-skins," as they were referred to consistently in the Italian American press, captured Schetti after he had lost control of his horse. Despite insurmountable odds, Schetti fought back courageously with his cavalry sword but eventually succumbed. *Il Progresso's* description of what these *pelle rosse* did

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[291]The fascination with the images associated with Buffalo Bill did not wane after Italians immigrated to America. In 1917 *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* reported that the bones of William Cody were removed from their temporary resting place and entombed in a boulder within Lookout Mountain in Colorado. *Il Progresso* wistfully remarked, "from this spot Buffalo Bill will be able to overlook the plains of Kansas, Nebraska and Wyoming where he used to roam during his younger years." *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 4,1917. The audience responses to Buffalo Bill's traveling show throughout Europe are from Venturoli, *La Patria di marmo*, 115-140.

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to Schetti's dead body offers insight into how Italian Americans perceived Native American civilization—"after he[Schetti] died. the savages scalped the victim as is their barbarous custom. and mutilated the rest of his body."[292] Appropriating language such as 'savage' and 'barbarian' to describe Native Americans, Italian Americans placed *pelle rosse* in the same general racial category as Africans.

Such language is evident in a letter written to the *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* in the same year by A.Gentini, expressing his outrage regarding the lynching of the eleven Italians in New Orleans. The identifying phrase he used to describe the kind of uncivilized barbarians who would commit such a crime like this was *pelle rosse*. Gentini raged against the crimes "like those committed . . . . by the *Pelli Rossi* of New Orleans," which he saw as "the shame of the 19th century, assaults against civilization by barbarism."[293] The notion that Native Americans were outside the bounds of "civilization" as prescribed by the racial hierarchies that Italians had constructed—hence, on a level with Africans—permeated Italian American thinking in these years. In describing the horrific acts of lynch mobs in the United States, the Italian American press often relied on comparisons to Native Americans as the only way in which it could express the sort of 'barbarity' being carried out. The appropriation of the words "red skin" to connote "savage" became commonplace in the Italian American mind.[294] Clear

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[292]Il *Progresso Italo-Americano*, February 26,1891.

[293]Ibid., August 3,1891.

[294]Aside from *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, other New York Italian American newspapers such as *L'Eco d'Italia* also appropriated "pelle rosse" to signify "savage."

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demarcations were established between "civilized" Europe and the nether regions of "barbarity" occupied by peoples such as Native Americans. The *Cristofero Colombo* declared in 1891 that the "civilized world was horrified over the lynching of eleven Italian immigrants and wondered if New Orleans was inhabited by people descended from European races, or did there exist [there] a population of *pelle rosse*."[295]

To Italian Americans the *pelle rosse* possessed unique racial attributes--similar to those linking Africans with cannibalism--such as a 'thirst for blood.' However, the manner in which Italian Americans construed and constructed these racial categories allowed groups to transcend—usually but not always to a 'lower' classification—their designated position if their behavior was uncharacteristic of their racial class. An interesting example that illuminates this point, and simultaneously re-enforced the Italian American perception of the 'barbarity' of the Native Americans, appeared in *Il Progresso* in 1891. Describing the New Orleans lynch mob, the paper observed that "the phrase goes that if you scratch a Russian you find a Cossack . . . . To the citizens of the Crescent City we would change this phrase to the following—if you scratch an American from New Orleans you will find a *Pellerossa* [the Redskin]."[296] Ironically, Italians themselves did not escape from this self-criticism. An article entitled "Scenes of Savagery"

Given the facile nature in which it was used, it appears that these sentiments were widespread within the Italian American community. For more examples of the comparison of lynch mob participants to "red skins" see, *Eco d'Italia*, March 17,1891; *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 16,1891, July 16,1901.

[295]*Cristofero Colombo*, March 15,1891.

[296]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, March 18,1891.

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described how a mob in the Italian American community in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania took the law into their own hands and viciously attacked another *paesano* accused of improper sexual relations with a fourteen year old girl. *Il Progresso* remarked that the men "surrounded the accused and began a savage ceremony of death—acting and dancing like Indians, singing songs of death."[297] In disgust *Il Progresso* condemned this savage act with the charge that civilized races did not conduct themselves in this manner. Therefore, in order to describe such behavior it was necessary to attribute these actions to the most primitive, carnal instincts humans possessed. The trope which suited this role was the image of the uncivilized *pelle rosse*. "The sad fact is," lamented *Il Progresso*, "that certain of our countrymen have nothing to envy from the Pelli Rosse."[298]

Given contemporary hierarchies of race, that Italian Americans perceived Native Americans as a racial group which possessed many of the same "uncivilized, barbaric" qualities as Africans is not necessarily surprising. What is illuminating, however, is that often the *pelle rosse* were ascribed a racial status positioning them below African Americans. One newspaper complained that in places such as New Orleans Italians were treated not even as "semi-civilized black skinned people," referring to African Americans, but as "blood thirsty *pelle rosse*."[299] The Italian American perspective of civility and its influence on their racial consciousness raises the following question: if

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[297] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano,* August 2,1910.

[298] Ibid.

[299] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, April 10,1891.

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Italian Americans believed that the United States had a civilizing effect on the "cannibal savages of Africa," how is it that they did not recognize a similar civilizing effect on the "blood thirsty *pelle rosse*?" The answer to this lies in Italian American definitions of civilization and its boundaries.

Like many Americans at the time, Italian Americans had a deep fascination with the culture and principles of Native American life. Occupying sections of the country—the prairies and plains—that were perceived as the hinterland where the long arm of civilization did not reach. Italian Americans construed these nomads as resisting the forces of modernization and civilization. Reporting about an Italian immigrant and his Mexican wife who were killed by *pelle rosse* in Arizona, *Il Progresso* scornfully described these Indians as "savage beings who resist every attempt at civilization as well as humanitarian sentiment."[300] Interestingly, *Il Progresso*'s fears that a dwindling Ute tribe in Montana would continue to create problems for non-Indians living in the region came under the heading of "race hatred." The perception was that the "stubborn" attempt of the *pelle rosse* to oppose the civilizing advances of the "Americans" and resort to violence originated from a disdain for the white race. "We fear that race hatred is very profound in these few representatives of this very unhappy race who have refused the civilization of the invaders and may bring serious disturbances to the state."[301]

One Italian American observer, Giuseppe Balbi, argued that "the nomadic life

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[300] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, December 30,1906.

[301] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, November 1,1906

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means that they[Indians] do not dedicate themselves to industry or agriculture. They refuse any kind of work. and other than hunting and fishing their women take care of everything else."[302] Aside from the cultural bias exhibited by this statement, it illuminates why Italian Americans were able to transcend their prescribed racial attitudes towards African Americans. Unlike African Americans—who worked in industry or on the cotton fields and sugar plantations in agriculture—Native Americans were perceived as altogether 'outside' the prescribed boundaries of "civilization."[303] According to Balbi, the culture of the *pelle rosse* exhibited all the tenets of barbarism one would expect. Their principal occupation being war, these "savages barbarically scalp their dead enemies and take women and children prisoner . . . . they worship spirits to which they offer animal sacrifices and attribute every event of their savage life . . . . they rely on witch doctors . . . . dress strangely . . . . and their attacks on wagon train pioneers are infamous." Native Americans were seen as "having no ideas," as damning a contemporary opinion of another culture as there can be. In fact, Balbi argued that with regard to skills, Native Americans "are inferior to the blacks of Africa, who are at least

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[302]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 7,1891.

[303]In 1906 *Il Progresso* reported on a band of 700 Indians in Utah and Wyoming who had depleted the supply of wild animals and had turned their attention to more domesticated animals, such as cattle. This had created concern among local cattle raisers who feared the killing of their livestock. Symbolically, this story contextualized the position that Native Americans were seen to occupy. Perceived to belong in the "wild"—they hunt for wild animals, and was only when these *pelle rosse* cross the boundary into the lands that the white, European had "civilized"—or domesticated—that there is a cause for concern. The boundaries of "civilization and savagery" were clearly delineated. *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 10,1906.

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familiar with the art of making cloth and dyeing it."[304]

How Italian Americans perceived Native Americans racially is a crucial variable in understanding how Italian Americans perceived Africans and why Italian American racial consciousness towards African Americans changed once in the United States. The same factors influencing Italian Americans to distinguish between their pre-migratory views of Africans and their post-migratory perceptions of African Americans--principles such as familiarity, notions of America as a civilizing influence--were the foundation for determining where they positioned Native Americans racially. *Pelle Rosse* were not affected by the wide brush of American 'civilization' because they remained outside its reach. Moreover, the familiarity bred between African Americans and Italian Americans never occurred with Native American peoples on any wide scale. According to Balbi, "This is the way the Indians of America are, whose race, because of its resistance to the civilizing process, a resistance more tenacious than that of Africans, is destined to be extinguished in the not too distant future."[305] Because of this peripheral existence, the requisite circumstances prompting a distinction regarding the racial status of Native American were never in place.

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In the beginning of the twentieth century, Chinese immigration restrictions, the Russo-Japanese War, as well as the xenophobic conditions Japanese immigrants

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[304] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 7,1891.

[305] Ibid.

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encountered in California, elicited responses in the Italian American mind. The conviction that Japan, and to a lesser degree China, were both members of the community of civilized races, permeated the Italian language press. The importance of color distinction notwithstanding—both the Japanese and Chinese were categorically conflated as the "yellow race"[306]—Italian Americans perceived these non-white, non-western races as capable bearers of civilization.

Il Progresso sarcastically criticized nativists who were drumming up threats of a "yellow peril" befalling the United States. Commending the Japanese in 1905 for their recent victory over Russia, *Il Progresso* argued that given the psychology of these two

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[306]In the Italian language press the Japanese and Chinese were consistently described as the "yellow race." Articles frequently used the phrase "yellow peril" to illustrate American fears over the influx of Japanese immigrants in California, an attitude they shared with the English-language press. There was also a discussion within the Italian American press regarding the "tratta delle schiave gialle" or "the yellow slave trade." *Il Progresso* condemned those responsible for the kidnapping and transporting of young Japanese and Chinese girls across the Pacific into slave conditions. Headlines reading "yellow slaves in California" did not differentiate between Chinese and Japanese as they were interchangeably grouped into the same racial category according to skin color. Distinctions of color were heightened by similar articles on the kidnapping of "white" girls sold into sexual slavery. The color demarcations were overtly evident in headlines which read "la tratta delle bianche"—"the white slave trade." In this article the association between American and white, in contrast to Chinese or Japanese and yellow, is manifestly clear. It described a situation in Chicago in which "fifty American girls" were lured under false pretenses to China where "rich Chinese men detained them as prisoners for immoral purposes in their sumptuous palaces." For "yellow slave trade" see *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, October 20,1905, August 2,1907. For "white slave trade" see *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* October 24,1905. This dynamic also littered the pages of the Italian Socialist Federation's official organ, *Il Proletario*. Both races were referred to as "la razza gialla" and phrases such as "the yellow Japanese, and also the Chinese" created an artificial homogeneity among both groups. Further, articles dealing with "white slaves" were also featured in *Il Proletario*, signifying skin color meant difference. See *Il Proletario*, February 21,1914; December 6,1913; February 2,1901.

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countries it was no surprise that Japan emerged victorious. "Japan is far ahead of Russia in human progress as education is extremely important . . . . the Russian forces were superior and brutal but they had all the characteristics of the Cossack disposition--fear of a police state, feudal characteristics, delinquency and misery. How could these people win in this mental and physical condition?"[307] According to *Il Progresso*, contrasted with Russia, Japan exhibited all the tenets of a progressive civilized race, and in some respects, far exceeded European nations such as Italy, which to many in the Italian American community was one of the standard bearers of European civilization: "In Japan popular education flourishes and people in America are afraid of a "yellow peril! . . . . There are many schools and illiteracy is very low, especially if compared to Russia and Italy . . . . it has all the elements of civilization in its evolution . . . . This is what Japan teaches us—this is civility in its highest form."[308]

In the days leading up to the agreement brokered by President Theodore Roosevelt in Portsmouth, New Hampshire that ended the Russo-Japanese War, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* commented on the nature of "The Yellow Race." Written by the Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi, it probed the geo-political and social ramifications of the Japanese military victory over Russia. Sergi, unlike some in the United States, did not see Japanese military victories as a "yellow peril" threatening the safety of America and Europe, but rather saw their burgeoning hegemony as a positive result of the war. "Even

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[307]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, December 16,1905.

[308]Ibid.

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though they[Japanese] are the dominant power in the Orient, it is a good thing since it will preserve the Asiatic race which has had civilization for thousands of years."[309] Regarding China, Sergi maintained that the "yellow race" possessed a history of civilization that enabled it not to be bullied by white European colonialism. The Chinese race, he asserted, "with so much historic civilization will return to its course of evolution and probably emulate the white European races but it will not be a threatening nation as some would like to think."[310] The complexity of Italian American consciousness towards race, color and civilization seems especially manifest in the following passage:

> the methods of colonialism that Europe never tires of--from treating indigenous peoples as inferior, or using conquered people as work horses or worse will not be possible in China. This is so because China as a nation is not comprised of primitive tribes like those of the Damara or the Daomei of Africa. In China the Europeans have shown to be less civilized than the Chinese, who are extremely civilized. In fact, if Europe were to conquer China it would be a disaster for humanity, a return to barbarism, and would destroy one of the most ancient and important models of world civilization.[311]

Contrasted to "primitive" --non-white--tribes in Africa, China, although described as a "yellow" race, produced a lasting and sophisticated civilization that could only be destroyed by the "corrupt" yet still "highly civilized" white races of Europe. However, despite Sergi's criticism of imperialist Europe, there remained at the core of his belief system the indisputable assumption that white European was the standard model of

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[309]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 9,1905.

[310]Ibid.

[311]Ibid.

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civilization. After all, would an "uncivilized" nation have the capacity to undertake colonial expeditions the magnitude and scope of European nations? Although Sergi viewed Japan and China as "civilized" races, he still assumed that both could learn much from the "white race."

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The Italian American mainstream press is only one window through which to examine how Italian Americans configured, and re-configured, complex hierarchies of race, color, and civilization. Equally revealing is the extent to which the racial hierarchies were maintained by the Italian language radical press. In the Italian Socialist Federation's major organ, *Il Proletario*, a class based plea for socialist revolution was often interspersed with unstated racial assumptions.[312] In "Americans and Americanization" *Il Proletario* portrayed a variety of races as less civilized than their Western counterparts. In this discussion of the benefits of socialism to humanity, the author, writing under the pseudonym Ilion, described the influx of immigrants to the United States as a form of voluntary colonialism. However, unlike European colonies such as Italian Eritrea, Americans did not perform menial labor in the United States but rather left such work to European immigrants. Ilion described a process of "Americanization" whereby various races—such as the descendants of the Irish immigrants who arrived in the 1840s and 1850s—ascended from this menial status.

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[312]This chapter will use *Il Proletario*--one of the most influential socialist Italian language papers in the United States--in order to illuminate the Italian American *sovversivi's* position on civilization, race, and color with regard to the "yellow" race.

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"Maybe in time," remarked Ilion, "the Italians and Poles will leave this bestial labor to other races—*possibly the Chinese*—and rise above this bloody toil in favor of the kind of work performed by the more evolved races."[313]

Within Ilion's racial hierarchy the constant influx of immigrants into the United States had created a "leveling of the races" by "bringing less civilized peoples into contact with more evolved people."[314] Although Ilion perceived the interaction of less civilized races—Italians, Poles, Chinese—with advanced civilizations—Americans—as conducive to bringing about a socialist society, he clearly subscribed to contemporary racial differences and hierarchies. It is this motivation which prompted Ilion's disclaimer that "my observations are not here to create hate or conflict between races but are just plain by all to see. This is why socialism is not restricted to some races, but rather involves all humanity."[315] Therefore, somewhat illogically, Ilion argued for the insignificance of racial difference by delineating how racial difference would directly lead to a socialist society.

As we have seen, the pages of *Il Proletario* often alluded to hierarchies of civilization and race as part of the larger goal of bringing about a socialist society in the United States. Regarding the revolutionary movement in China in 1911, *Il Proletario* maintained that the push for independence in that country had illustrated a desire for true

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[313]*Il Proletario*, June 4,1905.

[314]Ibid.

[315]Ibid.

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liberty. However, the argument was constructed with the normative assumption that "liberty and revolution" were ideals and actions originating in the West. Observed *Il Proletario*, "China did not accept Christ or Mohammed and did not accept the civility of Western civilization but they have something else in common which is revolution."[316] The difference between Western civilization and Eastern races was acknowledged as inconsequential because "the inherent desire for liberty present in all people cut across all barriers of climate or blood." Yet, much like Sergi's comment in *Il Progresso*, the radical Italian press unconsciously revealed an assumption of Western civilization as the standard by which all else was to be measured.

Chinese immigration to the United States preceded large-scale Italian immigration by some years. Between the years 1850 and 1890, some 290,610 Chinese immigrants arrived in the United States, with their numbers increasing three-fold from the 1850s to the 1870s.[317] In response to the increasing number of Chinese newcomers, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, prohibiting the immigration of Chinese laborers for ten years and denying citizenship to eligible Chinese. The measure was unique in that it was the first federal law ever passed banning a group of immigrants solely on the basis of race or nationality. The law was amended and renewed further in 1892, 1902, and 1904 to shore up remaining loopholes, creating a policy so

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[316] *Il Proletario*, November 8,1911.

[317] During the decade of the 1850s 41,397 Chinese immigrants arrived, the majority of whom settled in California. In the 1870s this number would increase to 123,201. Leonard Dinnerstein & David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration and Assimilation* (Dodd, Mead & Co., New York: 1975), 162-163.

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strict that it literally excluded all Chinese laborers and their spouses.[318]

Historians have outlined certain trends that coalesced in the late nineteenth century to produce legislation of this kind. A racist atmosphere pervaded the nation at this time, buoyed by a xenophobic reaction to the massive influx of immigrants. Pressure for exclusion came from native workers, politicians, and others in California, where the majority of Chinese immigrants settled, as well as the persistent support and lobbying of the national labor movement. Contrary to many scholars, however, Andrew Gyory argues that the national labor movement showed little interest in Chinese exclusion and played no role in its passage. The force behind that effort, he contends, was national politicians who manipulated the issue by arguing its benefits to labor in an effort to gain votes.[319]

Gyory further argues that acceptance of David Roediger's belief that a sense of whiteness permeated working class ideology in the nineteenth century should not lead to the assumption that—with respect to Chinese Exclusionary legislation—"Americans, whether working-class or not, therefore advocated racist policies. Racist thought and racist action are two vitally different things; however strong workers' 'sense of whiteness,' it did not automatically lead them to support racial acts or racial legislation

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[318]Michael Lemay & Elliott Robert Barkan, eds., *U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Laws and Issues: A Documentary History* (Greenwood Press, Connecticut:1999), xxxii-xxxiii

[319]Andrew Gyory, *Closing the Gate: Race, Politics, and the Chinese Exclusion Act* (University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 1998), 1.

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against nonwhites."[320] Gyory asserts that in American workers' minds there was a crucial distinction between "importation" and "immigration." Native workers viewed the importation of "contract labor" as the real threat to their economic and political well-being, and saw no reason to restrict the immigration of a particular race or nationality for its own sake. Gyory believed that "whiteness" was just one of a few factors shaping workers' sensibilities and actions in the late 1800s. Also at work were the ideals of free labor, free movement, equal rights, equal opportunity and universal brotherhood which would have all been undercut as a result of immigration restriction. "Whether faced with Chinese in North Adams, Scots in Georgia, or Italians in Pennsylvania, eastern workers identified importation, *not* immigration, as the evil to be guarded against--and they said so. Although they could have combined the two issues, workers repeatedly took pains to keep them separate and distinct."[321]

The debate over economics and race regarding the question of Chinese and Japanese immigration in many ways mirrors the coverage in the Italian language press, both radical and mainstream. Consistent with Gyory's argument, Italian immigrant socialists perceived the capitalist system and co-opted labor unions—such as the American Federation of Labor—as the primary movers behind exclusion legislation in the 1880s. According to *Il Proletario*, amidst the passage of exclusionary legislation the nation was in a state of economic panic as more and more capital was being invested in

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[320]Ibid., 69.

[321]Ibid., 69-70.

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foreign lands rather than domestically. As a result, the capitalist class manipulated the American public by using the Chinese as a red herring for all the economic problems facing the nation. Claiming that the Chinese "were an inferior race that ate rice from China, dressed in filthy Chinese clothes, and economized their wages in order to send it back to China," the capitalists "lied to Americans and trade unions alike" in an effort to manipulate the American public and conceal their own actions.[322]

At the root of these injustices, maintained *Il Proletario*, was the capitalist system's pernicious exploitation of the worker. Therefore, even though immigrants who allowed themselves to be used as "scabs" should be condemned for their short-sighted economic outlook, the real devil choreographing this nefarious ballet was capitalism. According to *Il Proletario*, "We have scabs from every nationality—the scab does not recognize a country and the exploitation of capitalism has no nationality."[323] The Italian Socialist Federation maintained that part of the reason that most unions and newspapers, such as the Mason and Bricklayer's Union in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, supported Chinese exclusion was directly related to the strong competition the Chinese posed to manual labor in the United States. Pressing for a class based, transnational alliance, *Il Proletario* protested against any form of organized labor that would confuse its interests with that of capital. "We cannot understand organized workers who vote against their brothers of other nationalities instead of the capitalist system, which is the first cause of

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[322] *Il Proletario*, November 23,1901.

[323] *Il Proletario*, April 12,1902.

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all the evils."[324]

The discourse relating to Japanese immigrants was much the same.[325] Before World War I, *Il Proletario* ran a series of articles on the "Japanese question" written by the famous Italian American radical editor and poet Arturo Giovannitti.[326] The focus of the series was on immigration legislation that seriously hindered the ability of Japanese immigrants, not only to enter the United States--primarily through California--but to establish themselves economically. Giovannitti insisted that the foundation for legislation such as the Anti-Alien Land Bill had less to do with race hatred than with economics.

In an effort to hinder the economic progress of Japanese immigrants, many Japanese residents of California were legally excluded from purchasing land and often forced to sell existing land they owned at bargain market rates to a public that colluded against them. Legislation prohibiting Japanese immigrants from public schools, outlawing marriages between Japanese and Americans, and restricting the influx of Asian women to the United States, was inspired by the descendants of "the people that stole the

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[324]Ibid.

[325]The peak years of Japanese immigration to the United States were from 1890 through 1930. In those years, Japanese immigration to the United States totaled 273,038. The years 1900 through 1920 were the peak years for Japanese immigrants, as 129,797 arrived between 1900 and 1910 and 83,837 between 1910 and 1920. Dinnerstein & Reimers, *Ethnic Americans*, 165.

[326]*Il Proletario*, May 17, 31,1913.

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land from the Indians."[327] Giovannitti used the example of the restriction on Japanese land ownership as an example of the overt hypocrisy of the Unite States Constitution as well as capitalism and its proponents. "If the inalienable right to own property is such a revered tenet, than how does the United States justify the hypocrisy of denying these 'constitutional' rights to certain citizens?" Further, he argued that such a law contradicted and subverted all the alleged benefits that capitalism sought to offer the "common citizen"--namely, the chance for social mobility. Observed Giovannitti, "If the law denying the right to own property is allowed to perpetuate, where is the so called justification of capitalism that preaches that anyone can become an Astor or Rockefeller?"[328]

The Italian-language radical press saw Japanese exclusionary legislation in general as a question with relevance well beyond the borders of California. According to Giovannitti, these acts of exclusion are "something big companies are pushing . . . in order to open up new countries to trade . . . . more specifically these companies would welcome a war with Japan as a way to capture the Asiatic and especially the China trade."[329] This was in line with a consistent pattern in United States foreign relations dating back to the Spanish American War, as well as American excursions into the Philippines, Cuba, and Latin America. The continual search for new markets to unload

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[327]*Il Proletario*, May 17,1913.

[328]Ibid.

[329]*Il Proletario*, May 31,1913.

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domestic exports usually led to military action on the part of the United States. The Japanese exclusion acts were perceived as a means to humiliate Japan in an effort to increase tensions between the two governments to such a point where the slightest provocation—real or imagined—would lead to a confrontation. Giovannitti sarcastically recalled the Maine incident as a prime example of American subterfuge creating a war. "This is the real reason and the only reason for the acrimony against the Japanese."[330]

Although *Il Proletario* stressed the power of the capitalist class to influence, and even direct American policy, at times an almost "unconscious" admittance that there were *other* reasons for anti-immigrant policies crept into its pages. Arguing that the continued influx of Japanese into California would not only change the ethnicity of the state, but also the character of the nation, Giovannitti clearly acknowledged the role that race had played in policy-maker's perceptions. He alluded to the "special laws" that were directed solely at Japanese and Chinese immigrants, such as the extra-legal measures preventing Asian women from entering the country in order to prevent the dilution of the *Caucasian race*. It is clear that immigration policies Giovannitti emphasized, such as restricting "Mongol women," refusing citizenship for Japanese, and "requiring certain qualifications of the Japanese and Chinese that were not asked of the European of the caucasian race were race specific doctrines—applied to members of the "Asiatic"(yellow) race and not the "caucasian"(white) race." Although Giovannitti believed economics determined policy, he admitted that racial difference contributed to projecting Chinese and Japanese

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[330]Ibid.

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immigrants as the "other." According to Giovannitti, "not having the faculty and the willingness to assimilate to the host culture due to racial differences, not able to enter public life because they are denied citizenship, as well as unable to join unions . . . . the Japanese in the West were completely segregated and have to create their own enclaves because there is too much difference between their race and the "yankee race."[331]

Unlike radical publications, the mainstream Italian language press perceived American racial prejudice as a primary factor behind governmental legislation that restricted the flow of immigrants to the United States. In 1908 *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* argued that exclusionary laws governing Chinese immigration to American territories were in "open opposition to the principles of the republic and the spirit of our institutions." Although the economic motive of preventing Chinese "coolies" from undercutting American labor was acknowledged as an important component of the bill, *Il Progresso* warned that the law could be badly misinterpreted. "If this law is passed it gives the impression that we are against Chinese of all classes and that the guiding impulse of the bill is racial prejudice."[332]

The paper reported on the determined activity of organizations such as the Foresters of America and men such as Senator E.J.Wolfe and Assemblyman A.M. Drew, both from California. The Foresters were a labor movement that had been started in reaction to the growing Japanese immigrant presence in California. At its annual

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[331] *Il Proletario*, May 17,1913.

[332] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, April 5,1908.

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convention held in Buffalo, New York in 1905, the Foresters unanimously voted for the exclusion of Japanese workers from the United States. Senator Wolfe, who also served as the President of the California Japanese Exclusion Society, had presented the proposal. Wolfe declared that the vote, which came out of the Forester's meeting, was directed only at Japanese coolies "as well as their friends from the same race in the 'celestial empire' [China]." For other classes of Japanese society," Wolfe added, "there would be no opposition."[333] However, although this xenophobia seems tempered solely by class concerns--the exclusion only of Japanese and Chinese labor competition--this type of legislation was at root a function of racial profiling. Most, if not all, Japanese and Chinese coming to the United States at that time were perceived through the same lens as the stereotypical "coolie," thereby assuming the same characteristics and traits that informed phrases such as the "yellow peril."

Il Progresso highlighted the story of Assemblyman Drew, whom the paper described as "one of the most radical agitators against the Japanese."[334] Drew had openly challenged the authority of the President by attempting to maintain segregation among the races in California--particularly the "white and yellow races." According to Drew, "in the history of races the amalgamation of whites with blacks and yellow is prejudicial to the first and not useful to the second."[335] Drew maintained that the "yellow race has brought

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[333]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 29,1905.

[334]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, February 16,1909.

[335]Ibid.

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with it to America all the negative elements of civilization . . . . furthermore, the white race cannot remain in a territory where the yellow or negro races are multiplying through immigration or procreation. If a Japanese person buys a house near a white person, the white person should absolutely leave because there is too much difference between the two in custom, habits, etc. You cannot have a strong and laborious generation with the amalgamation of races."[336]

Given the amount of coverage *Il Progresso* dedicated to the conditions faced by Chinese and Japanese immigrants, as well as its sympathetic tone, a decision to publish an article on the racial theories of A.M. Drew, or the exclusionary sentiments of E.J. Wolfe and the Foresters of America, suggests a rejection of racist thinking and anti-immigration sentiment. Along with its coverage of the Russo-Japanese War, *Il Progresso* followed the question of Chinese and Japanese exclusionary legislation with keen interest. Covering all sides of the issue of exclusion, *Il Progresso* maintained a deep respect for the "yellow race" as a civilized and racially advanced people. Referring to the front page article on the "yellow race" written by Giuseppe Sergi, the paper maintained that "we have no prejudice towards any race or nationality but rather feel that any human faction—any type or color—should be respected along with its history, independence and existence." The classification of Japanese and Chinese races as advanced or "civilized,"

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[336]Ibid.

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as well as the interpretation that the United States was acting through racial, rather than economic, was reflected in the coverage of immigration restriction laws.

In 1913 the paper printed an article titled "The Grave Japanese Question in California,"[337] outlining how President Wilson and Secretary of State William Jennings Bryan were trying to coerce the California legislature to abandon all measures with respect to Japanese immigrants that would bring international complications between the United States and Japan. *Il Progresso* alluded to a memo which stated that all foreigners, including the Japanese, had a right to buy land because they were "part of the pantheon of rights of all people." With regard to the Japanese, the memorandum did not perceive the right to own land as a right of Americans, but opted for the broader "right of all people." According to *Il Progresso* "even though President Wilson and Secretary Bryan did not intervene directly, they want to paralyze the xenophobia that at the moment is very acute in California."[338] The anti-Japanese and racist attitude toward Japanese and Chinese immigrants seemed obvious to readers of *Il Progresso.*

One of the more unique stories illustrating this point originated in Brooklyn, New York in 1911. Elsie Sigel, a Sunday school teacher, was in love with a Chinese man whom she had been instructing. *Il Progresso* remarked that this type of "hybrid union" between Chinese and Americans was not something entirely new in Brooklyn. In fact, marriages between members of the "yellow race" and Americans--usually in the form of

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[337] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, April 21,1913.

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missionary Sunday school instructors marrying their Chinese students-- had been occurring since the late 1880s. The first of these marriages had occurred in Brooklyn two decades earlier in 1889 and caused a public sensation. However, by 1903, referring to the Chinese men who married their American instructors, these events had become normal and went entirely unnoticed in Brooklyn. In fact, the unexpected element of the story was that the powerful institution of American racial and class bias did not prevent these "hybrid unions." According to *Il Progresso*, the acceptance of these marriages "is surprising in that racial prejudice is nowhere as deeply rooted in the world as it is in the United States. Furthermore, the situation is even more surprising given that these schools are not only frequented by Chinese men, but that they are from a humble and modest economic background comprised mostly of laundry workers, servants and cooks."[339]

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In her analysis of Italian and Chinese migratory laborers around the world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Gabaccia has noted that contemporaries had perceived the two groups as occupying "an ambiguous, overlapping and intermediary position in the binary racial schema common in the countries where they worked."[340] In the Italian American mind, however, an even more layered and complex ordering of racial categories prevailed. Describing Native Americans as "red skins" and Chinese/Japanese

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[338]Ibid.

[339]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, June 22,1909.

[340]Donna Gabaccia, "The "Yellow Peril" and the "Chinese of Europe," 178.

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as "the yellow race" spoke to the importance of skin color as a category of distinction--and as Toni Morrison has suggested, the distinction was constructed in order to differentiate "whites" from "non-whites." However, as was the case with Chinese and Japanese people, within the racial constructions of Italian Americans, the idea of "civilization" sometimes overlapped with notions of race and skin color--as in the case of the Chinese and Native Americans--to override factors that would have traditionally placed people in a position of "inferiority." This is most clearly the case with the perception that the "yellow" skinned Chinese were a "civilized" people and the "red skin" Native Americans were not--even though both were considered non-white. The ways in which Italian Americans ordered racial categories and the myriad factors that informed these categories reflect the complex reality of an Italian American racial consciousness which constantly evolved.

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Chapter 6

A Groping for Whiteness: Americanization, Nationalism, and the Consequences of Indeterminate Racial Status

Describing Italians, an American poet wrote, "His hair is curly and black, his face is tan, his brow is covered with honest sweat, and he earns what he can. He looks the whole world in the eye, because he knows he is indebted to noone."[341] Identifying Italians as individual workers who toil to make an honest day's pay, the poem's underlying message goes much deeper than the overt ode to industrialism's brand of rugged individualism. The poem's relevance speaks to the manner in which southern Italian immigrants were perceived as a racial group, as well as how southern Italian self-perception mutated within the vortex of American race relations. The distinction that southern Italians had "tan" faces was not just an innocent observation, but a perception loaded with racial meanings.

In 1909 the Reverend J.M.Cassin explained that if one wanted to understand the real nature of Italian immigrants the aforementioned poem would be of much greater value than a description offered by the Santa Rosa, California newspaper *The Citizen*. Listing the arrest statistics for public drunkenness in the Cloverdale district, the paper separated what it called "the white majority" from "Italians" and "Indians." In protest,

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[341] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 21, 1909.

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Cassin also wrote a letter to another Santa Rosa newspaper. *The Press Democrat*, expressing his surprise and anger that Italians were not considered part of the white race. Declaring this an "insult towards Italians," Cassin sarcastically chided the author of the article--"Italy was the gentle lady of the world, the leader in the arts when this writer's country [the United States] was still primitive and had not yet been discovered."[342]

Cassin bristled at the notion that Italian immigrants in the United States could be perceived as non-white and more directly, dark skinned. This is manifest by the dermatological juggling act whereby Cassin acknowledges that the dark complexion of Italian immigrants was due, not to their natural pigment, but to the "tanning" they experienced while working under the sun of Sonoma County. Further, the perceived connection between non-white races and characteristics of laziness and indolence is evident in Cassin's surprise that "such an insult could be levied at these industrious and hard working people." For Cassin, the exclusion of Italians from the white race, not only was an egregious mistake, but, within the context of America racial hierarchies, an "atrocious and unmerited " insult. Interestingly, *Il Progresso* picked up on this story from California and chose to re-print excerpts from Cassin's letter. At the end of the piece, *Il Progresso* noted that this was not the first time American papers had insulted Italians--clearly referring to the nativist vitriol that had been commonly directed towards these "new" immigrants from southern Italy. However, never before, claimed Il Progresso,

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[342]Ibid.

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"had these insults been hurled with so much malice and prejudice of race and nationality like the article published in the Santa Rosa paper."[343] *Il Progresso* agreed with Cassin's assessment that the exclusion of Italians from the white race constituted an "insult to our nationality." That *Il Progresso* defended the actions of Reverend Cassin and railed against perceptions that Italian Americans were non-white is not surprising. After all, Italian Americans had consistently deflected profiles that they were in-between white and black since their arrival in the United States. However, what was in the process of changing was the realization that not only was it "untrue" that they were non-white, but that to be considered non-white had now become an impediment to their progress in American society.

The racial consciousness of Italian Americans had mutated upon their arrival in the United States due to a racial environment that socially, politically, and legally subordinated peoples of color to an oppressive system of white racial domination. Quickly becoming aware of the institutional nature of American racial mores, as well as the effects that extralegal forms of violence such as lynching had on both their own communities and African Americans, Italian Americans searched for order within their own shifting racial hierarchies. This awareness of American racial structures often led major immigrant public opinion molders such as *Il Progresso* to express shock and outrage over the perpetuation of white "race hatred" towards African Americans.

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[343]Ibid.

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Arriving with predisposed racial perceptions regarding people of color, southern Italian immigrants would make racial distinctions between Africans and African Americans, perceiving American blacks as "higher" on the racial scale of civilization than Africans.[See Chapter 3] However, as the early part of the twentieth century passed, it would be this growing awareness of what it meant to be "black" in America, as well as the influence of internal and external events, that informed Italian Americans of the necessity to not only think of themselves as Americans—but more importantly, to perceive themselves as "white."

This chapter will examine the internal and external factors and conditions that informed the process whereby Italian immigrants would become "American" and "white." Italian language newspapers continued their reporting of American racial mores and African American lynching, and more frequently in the first two decades of the twentieth century, of race riots between whites and blacks. With their own history of discrimination vivid in their minds, Italian immigrants came to understand how hierarchies of race operated in the United States. The sympathetic view of the African American condition furnished Italian immigrants with the requisite knowledge to begin the process of groping toward whiteness. Concomitantly, textual changes within the Italian American settlements, such as the rise of Italian nationalism as well as immigrant reactions to events such as World War I, created a unique context within which to interpret racial disharmony in the United States. Italian American identity underwent a

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metamorphosis shifting from a provincial worldview to a newfound Italian nationalism closely linked to the leveling effects of Americanization. This identity crisis was inextricably related with a struggle over whiteness—more specifically, the increasing awareness of Italian Americans of what it meant to be considered "non-white" in American society.

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We have seen that throughout the Italian language press the lynching of Italian immigrants provided a window through which to examine the pernicious mores of American racism. Although few Italian immigrants were summarily lynched in comparison to African Americans, Italian language newspapers identified with the latter's plight. More importantly, the root causes underpinning white American racial animus was frequently discussed and analyzed. During the period before World War I, the Italian language press contributed significant space to discordant relations between whites and blacks, Italians and Americans. Whether it was *Il Progresso's* coverage of a major race riot, or a local neighborhood skirmish, the paper's understanding of why race riots erupted throughout American society was clear.

In August 1900, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* dedicated three columns of its front page to a riot that broke out in the area between 34th and 43rd streets and 7th Avenue between whites and blacks. Ostensibly the riot was an act of revenge on the part of neighborhood whites who suspected a black man had killed police officer Thorpe a few nights earlier. After Thorpe's funeral, "new violence erupted and a large number of

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people started hunting for Blacks and upon finding them began to beat them—even newspaper sellers ran after Negroes."[344] The riot was not an isolated incident for *Il Progresso* reported that by nightfall other disorders had exploded all over the city, including the foiled lynching of a black man who was then chased by an angry mob of whites up Eighth Avenue and eventually forced off the streetcar he was using to escape to safety. A man named Schwartz—who was the ringleader—forced the streetcar to stop by hurling a rock and hitting the motorman. Before he could throw another stone he was physically subdued by the police and cursed and stoned by an angry mob. At this point 300 police officers arrived in order to quell the disorder, although further violence then ensued between police officers and crowd members. According to *Il Progresso*, "at 12:00 midnight, the streets were empty except for police officers."[345]

Summing up the day's sordid events, *Il Progresso* incredulously noted that out of the seventy-two people wounded in the riot almost all were African Americans. In fact, many were reportedly beaten by police, who were criticized for using excessive force on blacks and whites. Further, there were twenty-seven people arrested, of which only four were whites. Upon being brought to a West Side Court, *Il Progresso* stated "even Judge Cornell was amazed that only four white people were arrested after such a grave disorder provoked by whites, saying 'there's no need to beat all Negroes after only one of them has committed a crime.'" *Il Progresso* lamented the outbreak of racial violence and

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[344] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 18,1900.

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"hoped that these scenes, which are a black eye on one of the most civilized cities, will not be repeated."[346]

Il Progresso's reporting of the race riot--the headline read "The struggle of race in New York"--was illustrative of the precarious position in which Italian immigrants found themselves in New York, as well as the rest of the United States. Although *Il Progresso* was a *prominente* owned and run daily, it catered to the masses of southern Italian immigrants longing for a sense of familiarity in a foreign land. Because white Americans described southern Italians as an inferior race--a non-white race--the customs of American racial practices affected them in a particular manner. Southern Italians would sometimes resist characterizations of themselves as "black" or "inbetween white and black," for the growing awareness in the immigrant community of what race and color meant in America became painfully clear. "All at once," *Il Progresso* wrote, "a man that was full of livid hatred for the descendants of Cam made his way towards the two beaten Negroes with a rope in his hands and began yelling 'Lynch them, lynch them!!' The rope was put around the Negro's neck and the drunken people started to pull the poor black who was blameless and had not done anything wrong—*except for having different skin than his oppressor.*"[347] Further, these were hardly rare occurrences in early twentieth century New York City, as numerous articles attest to the attempted lynching of African

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[345]Ibid.

[346]Ibid.

[347]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 18,1900, italics mine.

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Americans.[348]

During August of 1905 Booker T.Washington, president of the National Negro Business League, spoke at their annual convention held at the Palm Garden on 58th street and Lexington Avenue in New York City. The primary topic of his remarks, quoted *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, were "Il Sud ai negri"--the South to the Negroes.[349] The article, entitled "Jim Crow," is in many ways an exploration into the perverse psychological mindset of white Southern racial mores. According to *Il Progresso*, "Jim Crow—the derisive name that was attached to African Americans in the United States thirty five years after Uncle Tom's Cabin was published and the Civil War ended—is supported by the assumption, made by Charles Darwin, that the negro was the intermediary between man and beast." Very methodically, *Il Progresso* provided

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[348]In August of 1900 an African American man accused of shooting a white man was surrounded by an angry mob shouting "Lynch the Negro, kill him!" Only through the arrival of police reinforcements was the man saved—eluding the stones that the mob hurled at the police as they scurried him away. *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 24, 1900. During one week in July 1905, *Il Progresso* reported on an attempted lynching and a "race riot" in Manhattan. On July 11th, an article entitled "Race Hatred" detailed the plight of Henry Hart, an African American, involved in an altercation with a "mob of whites" in Manhattan. Shots rang out between Hart and a white man, James White, eventually leading to a throng of almost 5,000 people descending upon Hart's house screaming "lynch the blacks." On July 19th, the article "Another fight between blacks and whites" reported on the riot that broke out in the San Juan Hill district of Manhattan—between 61st Street and Amsterdam Avenue and 63rd Street and West End Avenue. *Il Progresso* commented "a real battle began in that area due to the pervading race hatred that exists there." *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, July 11, 1905; July 19, 1905. In 1906, an article told of the attempted lynching of a black woman in Brooklyn, New York by an angry mob. See *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 23, 1906.

[349]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 19,1905.

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examples of the various attempts to alter the mindset of the South, all of which were to no avail. Instead, the South had become more entrenched in racial segregation and discrimination. For example, there was the instance in Alabama where marriages between whites and Blacks were prohibited; a Post Office was closed because its director was African American; the Mayor of Charleston blocked the nomination of an African American, Dr.Crum, as tax collector because of his skin color; and finally, the story of the Irish woman in an Indianapolis hotel who had received one thousand dollars for her "heroic" stand in refusing to make the bed of Booker T.Washington. Washington was hailed as one of the great leaders of the Black race, although surprisingly less well known than Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia. Described as the "Black Moses" for his people, *Il Progresso* expressed admiration in Washington's ability to overcome racial obstacles and create institutions, such as Tuskegee, which had been so beneficial for the Black race.[350]

Building upon a sustained criticism of American racial structures—a criticism that had included not only the pernicious treatment of Italian immigrants but marginalized groups such as African Americans—*Il Progresso* lamented racism's chilling expediency. African Americans were excluded from the process of social, political, and economic justice, with skin color being the sole determinant for the assignment of "guilt." According to *Il Progresso*, "knowing how to die was more or less all that was permitted to Jim Crow. Furthermore, without formality or process, whites are there to lend a

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[350]Ibid.

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"hand" in this endeavor at the slightest indication."[351] In a telling conclusion, *Il Progresso* stated that only when the "great dawn of justice arrives will it free the white race from the chains of prejudice and redeem them from their cruel past!"[352]

For Italian immigrants living in the urban northeast, the reported lynching of their countrymen in the South and West created an understanding—albeit from a distance—not only of the precarious position of African Americans in the United States, but that the tentacles of racial violence could affect them. With the influx of African Americans into northern cities at the turn of the century the impact of racial violence became more immediate. On the same pages of the Italian language dailies, one could read reports of the attempted lynching of not only African Americans, but of Italians as well. In the first decade of the century, Italian immigrants read about Italian aqueduct workers in Paterson, New Jersey who engaged in a scuffle with American co-workers only to be targeted by a mob of 500 people and nearly murdered.[353] Other instances saw Italians threatened with lynching over simple street arguments and altercations—many times needing the protection of policemen firing warning shots to quell the angry hordes.[354] In Akron, Ohio mobs shouting, "lynch the Italian," served as a chilling reminder to newly arriving

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[351]Ibid.

[352]Ibid.

[353]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, September 15, 1906.

[354]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 6, 1907.

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immigrants of the dangers of being branded as "non-white" and "un-American."[355]

Indeed, this feeling of precariousness and vulnerability clearly affected the manner in which Italian immigrants strove to be perceived by white Americans. In the Italian American mind their racial status could never be the same as African Americans. and what they perceived as similar treatment—in the form of lynchings—only served to perplex and frighten them. *Il Progresso* wrote that in Akron "Enrico Tropeano, his brother and two friends were talking on the corner of North Street when two *Americans*[italics mine]—all of them drunk—passed the group . . . . the mob of Americans . . . . inspired by a race hatred which unifies them yelled 'lynch the Italian.'"[356] Interpreting the prejudice faced by African Americans as propagated by "whites" and racially motivated, Italian immigrants came to perceive similar violence directed at them as racially motivated as well. However, as illustrated in Akron, Italian immigrants saw the angry mobs that surrounded them not necessarily as the "whites" they consistently used in juxtaposition to "Black" victims," but rather "Americans." This allowed Italian immigrants the flexibility to "uplift" their race from a darker past they wished to escape from. Italian immigrants came to believe that the hatred and prejudice they encountered could be ameliorated by their acceptance as "Americans"—in some form or fashion. It was a category much less inflexible than the color boundary that had kept African Americans at the bottom rungs of the racial hierarchy in the Western world.

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[355]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, February 7,1911.

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The "discovery" of nationalism within Italian immigrant communities was a process that occurred over several decades.[357] It had been common for immigrants to leave southern Italy without any sense of national pride in the recently unified Italian state. Rather, it was village or familial ties that provided those from the *Mezzogiorno* with all aspects of self-identification. In their new home, settlement patterns usually reflected regional differences found in southern Italy. Moreover, the numerous mutual aid societies and religious organizations formed in the United States maintained the strong connections to the local town—for instance, religious associations were dedicated to a town's patron saint or Madonna.[358] The lack of national sentiment within the "Little

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[356]Ibid.

[357]While Mussolini's Fascist state may have contributed to the emergence of nationalism among Italian Americans, it was in actuality informed by a variety of factors that had occurred decades before. See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Making and Un-Making of the Italian American Working Class" in Cannistraro and Meyer, ed., *The Lost World*, Chapter 1.

[358]Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, Chapter 3.

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Italies" was obvious to Italian travelers in the United States such as Giovanni Preziosi, Luigi Villari, and Amy Bernady—all three would be drawn to the Italian Nationalist movement founded by Enrico Corradini in 1910. Later, in the 1930s, Italian anti-Fascist exiles, such as Massimo Salvadori, discovered strong nationalist sentiment in the Little Italies of America, noting with surprise and irony that "In Italy they had never been Italians, but in America they became Italian nationalists."[359]

Expressions of Italian immigrant nationalism, or *italianita'*, within immigrant enclaves manifested in myriad ways. The pressures of assimilation would begin to chip away at the cultural uniqueness of southern Italians and forge bonds around a national identity that was created in many ways as a means of protection and self-defense, but also served psychological purposes. How Italian Americans were viewed by American society was a constant concern and preoccupation--and with good reason. Under heavy scrutiny and derision by American society, the Italian immigrant community sensed that only a demonstration of Italian "civility," "culture" and "greatness," could convince Americans that these "undesirable" newcomers would make acceptable Americans. In essence, their

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[359]Quoted in Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy*, 4-5. See also Stefano Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics: The Italian Experience in Philadelphia* (State University of New York Press, Albany: 2001).

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road to becoming American was obstructed by the need to first become "Italian." Solidarity with Italy's African campaigns, immigrant attempts to introduce the Italian language into the New York City Schools, the invention and proliferation of Columbus Day celebrations, and intense patriotic pounding that the Little Italies were subjected to during World War I, were all part of this process.

Due to the pressures of assimilation, fears abounded within the immigrant community over the ability of Italians to maintain an Italian identity. In 1896 one observer alluded to the story of a New York City Catholic Priest who told the commissioner of immigration that Catholic clergymen conducted their masses, confessionals, and Sunday school services in English because second-generation Italians did not understand their parent tongue.[360] In reaction, in 1906, the first effort was made to have the Italian language taught in the New York City public schools. The perception of American contemporaries analyzing the ability of Italian immigrants to "properly" Americanize reinforced this apprehension. In 1913, a commentator for the *Sunset*, based in San Francisco, pointed to Italian interaction with other nationalities as the beginning of the process whereby Italians became Americans.[361] Thus, for many Italian immigrants the maintenance and transmission of the Italian language to their children served multi-faceted roles, including as a defense against several cultural intruders. Inextricably tied to

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[360] Salvatore A. Mondello, *The Italian Immigrant in Urban America, 1880-1920: As Reported in the Contemporary Periodical Press*, PhD Dissertation, New York University, 1960, 214.

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ideologies of Americanization were the inherent assumptions that Americaness meant "white" and Protestant—and if Catholics were allowed into this realm it was not the sort of "pagan" Catholicism practiced by southern Italians. According to Fred Rindge, an official of the Young Men's Christian Association, what Italian immigrants wanted most was knowledge of the English language. However, he concluded in 1914 that what they actually needed most was the Bible.[362] In New York City, proselytizing organizations, such as the Fireside League, arose with the direct purpose of teaching Italians English by using the stories of from the Old and New Testaments.[363]

"Nine-tenths of the children of Italians born in America and those who arrived at a tender age without a teacher to teach them their language or their patriotic and religious traditions end up ignorant of the slightest knowledge of their country of origin."[364] This passage, published in *Il Progresso*, is replete with the imagery of an emerging "Italian" nationalism that did not exist upon arrival in America.[365] The notion of a unifying Italian

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[361]Ibid., 215.

[362]Ibid., 235.

[363]In 1912 the Fireside League was organized by Mrs. Lemuel Call Barnes of Yonkers, New York. Barnes wrote a book entitled *Early Stories and Songs for New Students In English* which was used as a textbook for the program. Fred Rindge of the YMCA would later say that the efforts to "convert" Italian immigrants should not be left solely to organizations such as these. He believed that "everyone" should become a missionary—"simply start with the immigrant nearest you." Ibid., 235.

[364]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, November 4,1906.

[365]Orsi, "The Fault of Memory."

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language that would instill in younger generations the 'patriotic' and 'religious' traditions of a mythical national culture would become powerful tools in the construction of Italian immigrant nationalism.[366]

Since the majority of southern Italians immigrants spoke only their own regional dialects rather than a "standard Italian," the Italian community hailed the introduction of Italian in New York City schools "as a great moral victory."[367] The internal struggle of uniting the Italian immigrant community around a common language form was perceived as the biggest obstacle to overcome. According to *Il Progresso*, it was imperative that the immigrant communities come together on this issue--speak as Italians--or the greater good would not be served. "What will our hosts think of us if we cannot come to a consensus on this issue? And, what will they think about the intellect and morality of the

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[366]Leonard Covello, who was appointed principal of Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem in 1934, argued strenuously that the children of immigrants needed a knowledge of their language to give them a sense of identity in American society. See Leonard Covello with Guido D'Agostino, *The Heart is the Teacher*, (McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York: 1958) and *The Social Background of the Italo-American Schoolchild: A Study of the Southern Italian Family Mores and their Effect on the School Situation in Italy and America*, Francesco Cordasco, ed., (E.J.Brill, New York:1967). For a broader perspective on immigrants and New York City Schools, see "Stephen F. Brumberg, "Going to America, Going to School: The Immigrant Public School Encounter in Turn-of-the-Century New York City," *American Jewish Archives*, Volume 36, Number 2 (1984), 86-135.

[367]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, November 4,1906. Although Covello began teaching Italian at De Witt Clinton High School in 1920—the first class of its kind in that school—it wasn't until May 1922 that the New York City Board of Education placed Italian on an equal footing with other languages in New York City schools by offering Regents credits. See Covello, *The Heart is the Teacher*, 129-137.

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masses of our immigrants? An inability to come together will mean that the people who have fought for this opportunity will have to confess that the Italian immigrant population was not ready for the type of concessions given to other immigrant groups."[368] For Italian immigrants, the adoption of Italian into the New York City schools validated their heritage as worthy of American "respect." In 1906, *Il Progresso* exclaimed that the introduction of Italian, "was a great moral victory following years of struggle for the Italian community of New York," reflecting not only the emerging prominence of Italians as an interest group, but more importantly "the growing appreciation of the American public for our community."[369]

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One manifestation of a growing Italian nationalism whose meaning would continually mutate to meet the changing representations of identity within the Italian American community was the exaltation and celebration of Christopher Columbus. One of the reasons Columbus served as such an important symbol of Italian identity was the American fascination with, and respect for, Columbus. His historic journey of "discovery" resonated as far back as the founding of the country, as the American colonial past is littered with references to a man whom many perceived as the first "father" of the republic. Although the first Columbus Day parade can be traced back to

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[368]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. November 4,1906.

[369]Ibid.

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1792, the myth and imagery of Columbus would take on very different and specific meanings for the masses of Italian immigrants that arrived in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[370]

The emergence of Italian nationalism was partly in response to external factors such as American nativist attitudes as well as to internal factors such as the emergence of immigrant power brokers within Italian American communities. These *prominenti*, as they were known, nurtured and used public celebrations of Columbus as a way to flex their political and economic muscles within immigrant colonies. Carlo Barsotti, an immigrant slumlord and owner of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, began the most important Columbus Day celebration in New York City in 1892. *Prominenti* like Barsotti benefited economically and politically from their attempts to "Americanize" the immigrant. Although their efforts to eliminate southern Italian regional and provincial loyalties were motivated by self-interest, the stimulating of Italian nationalism among immigrants was nonetheless furthered.[371]

The uneasiness of possessing a dual identity—perceiving oneself as an American

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[370]See Claudia L. Bushman, *America Discovers Columbus: How an Italian Explorer Became an American Hero* (University Press of New England, New Hampshire:1992); Gerald McKevitt, "Christopher Columbus as a Civic Saint," *California History*, LXXI, (Winter 1992/93), 516-34; George E.Pozzetta & Gary R. Mormino, "The Politics of Christopher Columbus and World War II," *Altreitalie* (gennaio-giugno 1998) numero 17, 6-15.

[371]Pozzetta & Mormino, "The Politics of Christopher Columbus," 6-9.

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and an Italian—is manifest by the malleability of the Columbus figure. For Italian immigrants, the Genoese explorer served a variety of roles. One of the most important functions in celebrating Columbus was in response the American perception that Italians were of an inferior racial stock. In Columbus, an Italian who was revered by Americans in multifaceted ways—statues of Columbus adorned most American cities—Italian immigrants derived a sense of legitimacy and vindication in their ancestral homeland. According to George E.Pozzetta and Gary Mormino, by the turn of the century celebrations of Columbus "had become the symbolic expression *par excellence* of the dual identity characterizing Italian Americans. The details of Columbus' career quite literally allowed Italians to place themselves at the very beginnings of American history. Thus they served to legitimize Italian American claims to Americanness at the same time as they permitted immigrants to take pride in their *italianita.*"[372]

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In preparation for Italy-America Day--a proposed nationwide celebration recognizing and exalting Italy's entrance into World War I as an ally of the United States--The Society of American Florists offered their services and resources to provide every citizen with a flower to be worn in a show for support for the Italian nation. This offer came in response to Flower Propaganda chairman Francis H.Markoe's suggestion that in lieu of financial contributions, flowers should be worn instead.[373] President Woodrow

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[372]Ibid., 6.

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Wilson accepted the role of "honorary founder" and expressed his "pleasure" in designating May 24th as Italy-America Day in a telegraph to Charles Evans Hughes, President of the Society.[374]

For southern Italian immigrants in the United States, the impact and meaning of events such as Italy-America Day--and World War I as a whole--were widespread and influential. According to Christopher M. Sterba, during World War I the Italian immigrant population centered within the Italian colonies was subject to "complicated cultural and political pressures . . . . that forced them to face appeals to their national and group identity on three distinct levels. The War confronted them as Americans, as persons still deeply attached to the Old World, and as ethnic newcomers."[375] In myriad ways the domestic effects of World War I profoundly shaped the contours of what it meant to be an "American" citizen, as well as how that citizen should look and act. For

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[373]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, May 15,1918.

[374]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, May 14,1918.

[375]Christopher M.Sterba, "'More Than Ever, We Feel Proud to Be Italians: World War I and the New Haven *Colonia*, 1917-1918," *Journal of American Ethnic History*, Winter 2001, Volume 20, No. 2, 70-106. Quote from p.72. There is no full-length scholarly examination of an immigrant group from southern or eastern Europe during World War I. Four studies have dealt with aspects of the war and Italian immigrants: Gary Mormino, "Over Here: St. Louis Italo-Americans and the First World War," *Missouri Historical Society Bulletin*, 30 (October 1973), 44-53; Humbert Nelli, "Chicago's Italian-Language Press and World War I," in *Studies in Italian American Social History: Essays in Honor of Leonard Covello*, Francesco Cordasco, ed., (Brown & Littlefield, New Jersey:1975), 67-80; Fiorello B. Ventresco, "Loyalty and Dissent: Italian Reservists in America during World War I," *Italian Americana*, 4 (Fall/Winter 1979), 93-122; and Fernando Fasce, *Una famiglia a stelle e strisce: Grande Guerra e cultura*

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Italian Americans, the battles being fought on the American home front over assimilation, social acceptance and economic well being would be informed by their own perceptions of Italian contributions to the "war to end all wars" as well as America's dualistic perception of the Italian as war ally and unwelcome immigrant. The subsequent patriotic jingoism that accompanied the war, as well as the fierce governmental repression of radicals created an environment in which "Americanization" of those that were "foreign" became imperative.

The American entry into World War I unleashed a ferocious wave of repressive legislation and anti-hyphenate feelings. Resembling a crusade, Americanization drives and policy resounded from grass roots organizations all the way up to the federal government. World War I was the catalyst for accelerating longstanding nativist and anti-hyphenate feelings into a tangible attempt to alter what was perceived as the changing "fabric and texture" of American society. According to Desmond King, it was the national crisis created by the exigencies of war and the concomitant necessity to whip up support, that permitted jingoistic and nativist campaigns, such as "one hundred percent Americanism," to flourish.[376]

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d'impresa in America (Bologna: 1993).

[376] Desmond King, *Making Americans: Immigration, Race, and the Origins of the Diverse Democracy*, (Harvard University Press, Massachussetts:2000), 97. For other studies dealing with aspects of the effects of World War I and Americanization drives on immigrants in America, see David Montgomery, "Nationalism, American Patriotism, and Class Consciousness among Immigrant Workers in the United States in the Epoch of World War I," in *'Struggle a Hard Battle': Essays on Working Class Immigrants*, ed.,

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Throughout 1917 and 1918, city and state governments organized and initiated campaigns to further the process of Americanization for new immigrants. The centerpiece of these campaigns were English literacy drives, the need for which was exacerbated by data revealing that immigrants overwhelmingly comprised a majority of the 700,000 illiterate [in English] draftees.[377] On the federal level, a director of Americanization was appointed in the Bureau of Education at the Department of the Interior. The Bureau began its work in 1914 providing English language classes for immigrants. The Americanization division appointed racial advisors in order to more fully understand these new races, foster a better relationship among them, as well as continue the educational aspects of Americanization. The bureau issued a monthly bulletin--*Americanization*--targeted to an audience labeled "the workers of the country."[378] In a memorandum entitled "What is Americanization," in 1917, Philander P. Claxton, the commissioner of education, stressed the importance of education as the vehicle through which the tenets of Americanization could be channeled to the immigrant masses: "Americanization is a process of education, of winning the mind and heart through instruction and enlightenment. From the very nature of the thing it can make

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Dirk Hoerder (Illinois:1986),327-54; James H. Barrett, "Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880-1930," *Journal of American History*, 79 (December 1992), 996-1020; Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 1990).

[377] Ibid., 97.

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little or no use of force. It must depend rather on the attractive power and the sweet reasonableness of the thing itself."[379]

One contemporary observer commented that World War I "awakened Americans to the danger that threatened our country in the presence here of immigrants whose allegiance was divided. We took it for granted that that the newcomers were being assimilated; most Americans had assumed that the foreign-born were being converted into loyal Americans. The war, however, taught us that the migrants were potentially unpatriotic."[380] Americans began to demand "100 percent Americanism" from residents and non-citizens, as well as an unyielding loyalty and patriotism to the American cause in the War. In 1915 Frances Kellor, the editor of the New York magazine *The Immigrants in America Review* stressed the need for a conscientious effort to "forge the people in this country into an American race" that would be loyal to the United States in times of war and peace. Given the heterogeneity of races delineated at this time, the use of the term "American race" speaks to a narrow construction of who could become American. In the view of Barbara Solomon, Americans conflated conceptions of democratic society and Anglicization. "The country which had received all the European nationalities, as well as

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[378] Quote from bulletin *Americanization* from King, *Making Americans*, 91.

[379]Ibid., 92.

[380]Quoted by Mondello, *The Italian Immigrant in Urban America*, 229, from an article published in *The Outlook* in 1916 by Gregory Mason entitled "An Americanization Factory, An Account of What the Public Schools of Rochester Are Doing to Make Americans of Foreigners."

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the Chinese, Japanese, and Negroes, was offered another, higher image of the American: Anglo-Saxon in coloring, lineaments, and physique; Protestant in religion; masterly in nation-building."[381] Kellor summarized the central goal of the Americanization movement as the creation of "one people in ideals, rights and privileges."[382]

Springing up around the country patriot leagues and organizations--reminiscent to the Sons of Liberty during the Revolutionary period—saw themselves as enforcing and maintaining loyalty to the cause. Groups such as the National Security League, the American Defense Society, and the American Protective League, sought to root out subversives and radical agitators and anyone else who spoke out against the American role in the war. In 1917 and 1918 President Wilson officially sanctioned patriotic vigilance by signing into law the Espionage and Sedition Acts—the most repressive civil rights legislation since the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798. Heightened by fears of the

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[381]Solomon quoted in King, *Making Americans*,19-20.

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revolution in Russia, the Espionage and Sedition Acts provided the context for the ensuing government sponsored Red Scare of 1919 and 1920.[383]

For Italian immigrants with radical political leanings, the message of persecution, detention, and deportation--even execution--made it stridently clear that continued agitation would be met by the full weight of the American government. The suppression of radical newspapers and journals, the deportation of prominent anarchists such as Luigi Galleani, and the mysterious death of anarchist Alfredo Salsedo—charged with the Wall Street bombing of 1920—earmarked the height of the Red Scare. Indeed, the suspicion and suppression of those with radical sympathies and ideologies continued past the Red Scare of 1919-1920 with the "legal" execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. However, the American perception that Italian immigrant newcomers bore the stigma of "anarchists and subversives" was only exacerbated by the context of events surrounding America's first modern industrial war. The growing American identification of immigrants with radicals profoundly affected the self-identification of the larger population of Italian Americans who had no connection to radical politics, inspiring them to demonstrate--

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[382]Mondello, 219-220.

[383]Avrich, *Sacco and Vanzetti*, 93-95. See also Robert K. Murray, *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920* (McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York:1955).

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through their emerging Italian nationalism--their newfound loyalty to the United States.

According to historian Philip Cannistraro, it was the outbreak of World War I that set in motion the process of solidifying a "national" consciousness. In effect, the sense of Italian identity that Salvadori had observed suggests "the degree to which the pressures of adjustment, assimilation, and acculturation had combined to work a reshaping of self-identification among Italian Americans, replacing localistic identities with a single, Italian identity."[384] As southern Italian immigrants became more "American," the very nature of their experience in the United States fostered an awakening of Italian nationalism that they had never tapped. Concurrently, their image in the American mind would improve when Italy joined the Allied side in the war in 1915, which two years later linked Italy and the United States as "equal" partners in the war effort. For Italian Americans, this association with the United States legitimized Italy, and their heritage, as one worthy of American respect.

The major voice exhorting immigrant assimilation came from the *prominenti*-run Italian language newspapers in the United States. At the turn of the twentieth century, the Italian language press's coverage of local news from the various towns of southern Italy diminished greatly. Thereafter, a focus on the national news of Italy was emphasized, especially during the Italian government's military ventures in Libya in 1911-1912. The emphasis on "national" news in order to glorify the achievements of the *patria* found a receptive immigrant audience that by World War I had permanently settled in their new

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country.[385] Notwithstanding return migration to Italy, Italian immigrant enclaves were becoming less fluid, and in terms of immigrant arrivals, less frequently replenished with an influx of southern Italian culture and traditions. Although, cultural traits carried over into the next generation of Italian Americans, the beginning of a unique "Italian American culture" began to emerge within immigrant communities.

Within the pages of Italian language newspapers the transition from news centered on local towns and villages to national news continued to evolve during World War I. According to Nelli, in Chicago the increased coverage of national news in Italian language papers represented "a widening of immigrant horizons. At the same time,

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[384]Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy*, 5-6.

[385]For example, at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, 296,414 Italians immigrated to the United States, of which 251,612, or roughly 85 %, originated from southern Italy. However, due to wartime's closing of the immigration spigot, the period from 1915 through 1920 saw Italian immigration dwindle to a total of 242,465 immigrants--again, the majority [207,873] from southern Italy. If these numbers are compared to the five years of Italian immigration leading up to World War I, the drop-off is staggering. Counting those listed from southern Italy alone, 971,366 southern Italian immigrants entered the United States between 1910 and 1915--this was four times the total that would arrive the last five years of the decade. Furthermore, if one examines the number of foreign-born Italians in the United States in 1900, 1910, and 1920, the drop-off of immigrant arrivals at the end of the decade becomes manifestly clear. Between 1900 and 1910 there was an increase of foreign-born Italians residing in the United States of 859,098--almost three times the number that arrived in 1900. Between 1910 and 1920 the difference was only 266,988--only 1.2 times the number arriving between 1910 and 1920. Factoring in the above numbers, we can assume that most of the 1,610,113 foreign born Italians in 1920 arrived in the first half of the decade. See Edward Fenton, *Immigrants and Unions, A Case Study: Italians and American Labor, 1870-1920*, PhD Dissertation (Harvard University, Massachussetts:1957), 581-583.

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identification with America gradually replaced that with Italy."[386] During the period of World War I Italian language newspapers, such as *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, presented the most complete coverage of the war, devoting all of page one and most of the news sections to events in Europe. Although *Il Progresso* jingoistically trumpeted the cause of Italy and the prominent role she played in the war, the paradox within the immigrant colonies was how little—beyond feelings of nationalistic pride—Italian Americans shared in the wartime emotions of the movement. Relatively few Italian immigrants, compared with the total numbers who had emigrated from Italy, returned to fight for the Italian state, even though Italy considered it the duty of emigrants to do so. Further, many Italian Americans were unwilling to part with their hard earned American money as evidenced from many editorials in Italian language papers lamenting the poor response of Italian Americans to the Italian government war bond drive. Simultaneously, the urge to be accepted on equal footing by Americans pressured Italian Americans to loyally support the American war effort. Obviously, the fact that Italy and American were wartime allies facilitated this choice, as studies conducted during and after the war found the mainstream Italian language press to be predominantly loyal to the United States—unlike many German American newspapers.[387]

Within *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, there existed what Nelli labeled a "duality

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[386]Nelli, 67.

[387]Ibid., 70.

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of interests" that for Italian immigrants was in no way incongruous.[388] The effects of the migration processes of acculturation and adjustment—replete with its attendant xenophobia and racism—made necessary the glorification of Italian nationalism. The press often exaggerated the wartime successes of Italy and chafed at her postwar "mis-treatment" from the other allied nations. The very same factors would be at work in the positive Italian American response to Mussolini and Fascism's fierce nationalism. In a country where southern Italians were consistently derided, the talisman of a strong national state with a new international profile gave immigrants hope that their adopted country would now see them in a different light. The press' magnification of Italy's achievements throughout the war was in many ways a subconscious attempt to earn the status and recognition that was denied Italian immigrants in the United States. For Italian Americans, their participation in Italy-America Day festivities was deemed an excellent opportunity to demonstrate to Americans the loyalty and enthusiasm Italian immigrants. According to *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, "We have no doubt that our appeal, in the name of the fatherland which is so close to our hearts, and for the sake of our prestige in this land, will touch the souls of Italian Americans."[389]

The glorification of Italy in part was steeped in the process of Americanization, for its inspiration had a unique American context. Because of the American contempt for

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[388]Ibid., 73.

[389]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, May 19,1918.

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the social and economic problems of Italian immigrants. as well as a racial perception of their inherent inferiority, Italian immigrants' urge to uplift the achievements of Italy was a coping mechanism to handle the extreme measures of "Americanization and assimilation." In order to demonstrate they belonged in American society, to be accepted—in a society that consistently told them they did not—Italian immigrants pointed to the achievements of their ancestral homeland as proof that they were of "good stock."[390] In describing the celebrations attendant to Italy-America Day, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* remarked:

> All Italians of America devotedly grateful to their second Fatherland will participate in a most dignified manner with enthusiasm within their souls . . . . It will be an apotheosis for our Italy, and we must in every way demonstrate to the American public that we are entirely worthy . . . . In every Italian house, store, and office, our sacred banner must fly next to the glorious flag of America and on the chest of every son of Italy—a red, white and green ribbon must be worn—a sign of our immortal land.[391]

Historian Rudolph Vecoli asserts that during the World War I the loyalty of ethnic nationalism more often than not overrode class solidarity among Italian immigrant workers.[392] In particular, the nationalistic fervor over World War I was so intense that it stirred a serious debate within radical circles. In essence, a schism developed between

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[390]Nelli, 73; see also John P. Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism: The View from America* (Princeton University Press, New Jersey: 1972), 77-143.

[391]*Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, May 23,1918.

[392]Vecoli, "The Making and Un-Making of the Italian American Working Class,"

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those radicals who opposed the war, as they did all wars, and those who saw this as an opportunity to bring about social revolution. Some radical ideologues would eventually shift from radical theories to an emerging nationalist and Fascist mindset. However, the effect on the radical community notwithstanding, Vecoli minimizes the impact of nationalist feelings by claiming that those Italian immigrants who turned against radical leaders opposed to the war were "intoxicated by jingoist propaganda."[393]

This is a simplistic account that not only assumes widespread support for radical leaders among Italian Americans—which is doubtful—but also privileges the ideological debates of radicals over that of non-radicals. Christopher Sterba offers a much more pro-active, balanced interpretation that discusses the true nationalistic sentiments many Italian Americans adopted in these years. According to Sterba: "The enthusiastic participation of Italians in the war effort was not fundamentally coerced o manipulated, nor was it an anomaly of their immigrant experience--a fit of wartime hysteria or false consciousness. Their behavior during the war represented a genuine, inspired articulation of achievements and rights . . . . Italians and other new immigrants wanted recognition of their presence and contributions."[394]

Illustrated by Italian American campaigns to include teaching of Italian language in New York City public schools, the pride derived from Christopher Columbus, and the

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[393]Ibid., 4.

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nationalism generated by events such as Italy-America Day, the embrace of *italianita'* was a process that took decades, rather than a few short years. Italian immigrants were active participants in the process as well, interpreting and negotiating the messages permeating within their communities. The message of *italianita'*—promoted vigorously by *prominenti* for their own agenda—was not simply accepted by an unwitting mass of immigrants who did not know better. Rather, Italian immigrants utilized *italianita'* as a way to demonstrate their worthiness as Americans, to uplift themselves beyond contemporary racial depictions of southern Italians as inferior. Constructing an "Italian" identity within the Little Italies that was inextricably linked with becoming "American," Italian immigrants created a mythic lens through which to see their past, present and future. It would be this lens that Italian immigrants would increasingly look through when they viewed the racial landscape around them.

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Attempts at proving they were a "civilized" people by glorifying the achievements of Italy or claiming their presumed racial difference lay only with their country of origin, rather than their "swarthy color," demonstrated the mutation of southern Italian racial consciousness in the United States. The process whereby southern Italians would construct an image of themselves as "white" would take decades. Through the process of Americanization, with all its attendant meanings—one of which was an understanding of the privileges attributed to having "white" skin—"swarthy" southern Italians mirrored the

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[394]Sterba, 99.

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racial thinking of their "white" contemporaries. Not imprisoned by the rigidity of their skin color, Italians, as well as other southern and eastern European immigrants at the time, eventually constructed for themselves a "white" identity. Evidenced by the consistent exposure given to the plight of African Americans in the pages of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, it was quickly learned that to be considered non-white in America posed particular, and often, deadly consequences. The lesson was learned so well that to be described as non-white was considered an insult of the highest degree.[395] Whiteness, then, became a crucial component in the Italian desire to prove their worth as Italians, but also as Americans.

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[395] *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*, August 21, 1909.

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Epilogue

The era of mass immigration of southern Italians to the United States is a unique window through which to examine issues of race and whiteness in the Italian American mind. Before World War I, when lynching was a weapon widely used against African Americans as well as Italian Americans, and when Italians were generally regarded as non-white, Italian immigrants could easily identify with Blacks. Italians soon began, however, to understand the privileges associated with being considered white in the United States.[396] By 1909, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* expressed outrage when a newspaper in California still considered Italians as non-white, charging that it was an "insult to our nationality." In the post-war period, the process whereby Italian Americans would embrace whiteness accelerated due to a number of internal and external factors.

The impact of World War I upon the militancy and political radicalism of the Italian American community was severe. The start of Federal government repression in 1917, with its emphasis on foreign and especially Italian anarchists, set in motion a gradual abandonment of the once widespread radical political ideology within the Italian American community. Although the post-war Red Scare subsided in the 1920s, the continued identification of immigrants with radicalism and un-American behavior continued, culminating in the Quota Act of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924. The concern among Americans that foreigners were bringing in subversive ideologies and tainting American society came to a chilling denouement with the execution of Nicola

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[396] Vecoli, "The Making and Un-Making of the Italian American Working Class."

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Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti in 1927.

Although the case was an international *cause celebre*, the mainstream Italian language press in the United States was surprisingly mute. Indeed, only after the sham of the trial became clear did *prominenti*-run newspapers begin to defend the two men as Italians, but not anarchists—the same position taken by Italian Fascist dictator Benito Mussolini.[397] Some historians have dated August 23, 1927—the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti—as the "end of the road for Italian American radicalism."[398] Although this may be an extreme view, the tragedy did hasten the Americanization, or whitening, of Italian Americans. To Italians the case of Sacco and Vanzetti was a clear indication, not only that American society would not tolerate their political radicalism, but that entrance into American "whiteness" demanded that racially progressive, or "un-American," views should be abandoned. Indeed, in the 1920s, *prominenti* such as Generoso Pope picked up the mantle of Americanization and exhorted Italian Americans to learn English, become naturalized, and register to vote through his newspaper, *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*.[399]

The period from the late 1920s to American entrance in World War II may be seen as a watershed moment in relations between Italian Americans and African Americans. The post-war migration of African Americans into northern urban cities would create

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[397] Philip V. Cannistraro, "Mussolini, Sacco-Vanzetti, and the Anarchists: The Transatlantic Context," *Journal of Modern History*, Volume 68, Number 1 (March 1996), 31-62.

[398] Topp, "The Italian-American Left: Transnationalism and the Quest for Unity," in *The Immigrant Left in the United States*, 142.

[399] Philip V. Cannistraro, "Generoso Pope and The Rise of Italian American Politics, 1925-1936," in Lydio F. Tomasi, ed., *Italian Americans: New Perspectives in Italian Immigration and Ethnicity* (Center for Migration Studies, New York: 1985), 264-88.

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residential situations—especially in New York City—in which Italian Americans and African Americans lived in close proximity in large numbers. Little Italies such as East Harlem, New York, became ethnic "strongholds" with rapidly shrinking borders as emerging African American neighborhoods expanded.

Crucial to the growing Italian American attraction to whiteness was the rise of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime in Italy, his colonial expansionism, and the impact of Fascism on the Italian American community.[400] Community leaders, Italian Americans generally, and major Italian American dailies trumpeted the glory of Fascism and Mussolini, spurred on by the widespread admiration that Mussolini won among Americans. Fascism solidified the process of community formation among Italian Americans that had begun earlier, giving Italian Americans symbols of pride and self-confidence that they had previously lacked. By a perverse irony, Fascism reinforced ethnic identity among Italian Americans while at the same time arming them with a means they could use to hold their heads high within the larger context of American society. Nationalist rhetoric was highly charged with racial overtones that justified the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935-36 as an attempt to "civilize" that country, as well as to avenge the earlier Italian defeat at Adowa in 1896. The Italian invasion, generally considered the high point of Italian popular consensus behind Mussolini, sparked protests within Black communities in the United States. The response of many Italian Americans was to "defend" their national image and their communities against what they now

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[400] On Italian Fascism and its effect upon Italian America communities, see Diggins, *Mussolini and Fascism;* Cannistraro, *Blackshirts in Little Italy*; Stefano Luconi, *La "diplomazia parallela": Il regime fascista e la mobilitazione politica* (Milan: Angeli,

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perceived as African militancy in the United States.[401]

Indeed, in the period 1935-39 racial issues were given prominence in the Italian and Italian American mind, for the Fascist adoption of anti-African racism is directly linked to Mussolini's adoption in 1938 of anti-Semitic measures,[402] a process that found deep resonance in Domenico Trombetta's racist-Fascist paper (published in New York City), *Il Grido della Stirpe*. No longer feeling like racial victims, the pride garnered from colonialism and racism imbued many Italian Americans with a sense that they were now part of a dominant "oppressor" class. Although the events of the inter-war years expedited the process whereby Italian Americans would perceive themselves as white, the process itself had been well under way.[403] As we have seen, the evolution of a *national*

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[401] For the reaction of the Italian American community to the African American uprisings over the Ethiopian invasion see Nadia Venturini, "African American Riots During World War II: Reactions in the Italian American Communist Press," *Italian American Review*, Volume 6, Number 2 (Autumn/Winter 1997-1998), 80-97; and *Neri e Italiani ad Harlem: Gli anni Trenta e la guerra d'Etiopia* (Edizioni Lavoro, Roma: 1990); Fiorello B. Ventresco, "Italian Americans and the Ethiopian Crisis," *Italian Americana*, Volume 6, Number 1 (Fall/Winter 1980), 4-27. For the African American reaction to the invasion see Joseph E.Harris, *African-American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941* (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge: 1994); William R. Scott, *The Son's of Sheba's Race: African Americans and the Italo-Ethiopian War, 1935-1941* (University of Indiana Press, Bloomington: 1993).

[402] This is the theme developed in Maiocchi, *Scienza italiana e razzismo fascista.*

[403] Vecoli takes a somewhat different approach: "Rather than the Americanization of the Little Italies during the interwar years, it would then be more accurate to speak of their Fascistization." See Vecoli, "The Making and Un-Making of the Italian American Working Class." For an opposing view see Madeline J. Goldman, "The Evolution of Ethnicity: Fascism and Anti-Fascism in the Italian American Community, 1914-1945," unpublished PhD dissertation, Carnegie Mellon University, 1993. Although Fascism's effect on Italian American communities, vis a vis, the growth of an Italian nationalism intertwined with racism, was undeniable, in many ways these trends were intimately enmeshed with becoming American. The interpretation of Mussolini's nationalist

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identity as Italians—rather than an association based upon provincial loyalties—had begun to emerge as early as the 1880s around Italian colonial policies and was influenced by the pressures Italian immigrants faced within America society upon arrival.

Italian American acceptance of New Deal public assistance programs in the 1930s would have racial ramifications decades later as government sponsored welfare programs became associated with African Americans. In Italian American popular memory, the degree to which Italians received assistance during the depression was minimal, yet recent studies have shown that Italian neighborhoods were among those that received high amounts of public relief. This would in some ways inform how second and third-generation white ethnics of the 1960s and 1970s would interpret Great Society programs. Burying the memory of governmental assistance, partly because "self reliance" fit better with "Americaness," and partly to justify outrage over federal welfare programs intended to assist urban minorities, assaults upon welfare recipients, although partially motivated by economics, must also be understood in the context of race. The Italian American view of post-war public welfare was an extension of their deliberate attempt to disassociate themselves, and their past, from all things perceived as "black."[404]

Perhaps the most definitive moment in Italian American history was the entry of the United States into World War II in 1941. Just as previous wars had done for other marginalized groups, World War II offered second generation Italian Americans a chance to "prove" to Americans that their loyalties were undivided. Faced with this opportunity,

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policies must be examined through an American context where the pressures of assimilation and Americanization were constantly at work.

[404] Luconi, *From Paesani to White Ethnics.*

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second generation Italian Americans volunteered and served in the U.S. armed forces in great numbers—perhaps as many as 200,000 from New York alone.[405] Italian American exposure to people of various ethnicities, as well as being stationed in different states or countries, began to loosen ties to their communities. In effect, the war greatly accelerated the assimilation of all ethnic groups, especially Italians.[406]

However, with America now at war with Italy, and with the Federal government's designation of 600,000 Italian resident aliens as "enemy aliens," the stigma of Italian American as un-American still had not fully disappeared. Italian enemy aliens were required to register and obtain identification booklets complete with fingerprints and photographs; they were also subject to restrictions and regulations. Government posters urging Italian Americans "not to speak the enemy's language—speak American," as well as signs in the windows of ethnic businesses promising "no Italian spoken for duration of war," underscored the level of mistrust and fear of Italian enemy "subversives." One outcome of this trend was a 40 percent decrease in broadcasting in immigrant languages between 1942 and 1948. Although President Franklin D. Roosevelt removed Italians from the list of enemy aliens in October 1942, Italian Americans did suffer some damage to their morale and integrity. The fact that government documents in 1942 described the complexion of Italian resident aliens as "dark" and "swarthy,"[407] suggests the degree to

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[405] Cannistraro & Meyer, "Italian American Radicalism," 42.

[406] For an overview of the impact of the war on Italian Americans see, Gary R. Mormino and George E. Pozzetta, "Italian Americans and the 1940s," in Cannistraro, *The Italians of New York*, 139-53.

[407] Federal Bureau of Investigation case files for Italian enemy aliens Antonio Buonapane and Peter Cassetti reveal that that even up through 1942 Italians were still not

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which Italian immigrants were still being seen as non-white. The shedding of enemy alien status, along with participation in the war, can be seen as steps in overcoming wartime obstacles to attaining whiteness.[408]

The interaction between Italian Americans and African Americans after World War II came within the context of a changing America. The dawning of a Cold War culture exacerbated by McCarthyism, the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement, and the "white flight" to the suburbs, were the backdrop for an increasing territorial struggle in Northern cities. The political demise of Vito Marcantonio in 1954—the progressive Congressman from East Harlem repeatedly elected by a coalition of African Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Italian Americans—was symbolic of the shift. Italian immigrant enclaves began to shrink as Italians "disappeared" into suburban areas and acquired college educations, especially through the G.I. Bill. Federal and state housing programs designed to offer low income populations better housing precipitated what Italians saw as a drastic change to "their" ethnic communities. Indeed, for those who stayed in the old neighborhoods the process of distancing was breaking down with the arrival and close proximity of an increasing number of African American residents. In New York City, what became tabbed as "ethnic opposition," or "ethnic racism" to these changes arose politically in the form of "backlash" candidates such as Mario Procaccino. The 1969

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defined as "white." FBI Case Files, July 24, 1942, August 3, 1942, Class 146 Files, Folder 146-13-2-017-36, Alien Enemy Unit, Department of Justice, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

[408] For insight into the Italian American experience as America's enemy aliens, see Stephen Fox, *The Unknown Internment: An Oral History of the Relocation of Italian Americans During World War II* (Twayne, Boston: 1990); Lawrence DiStasi, ed. *Una Storia Segreta: When Italian Americans Were Enemy Aliens* (AIHA, Berkeley: 1994).

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democratic candidate for mayor in New York City, Procaccino provides a case study through which to understand the process whereby Italian Americans became white ethnics. Procaccino's rhetoric, racist and reactionary to many African Americans and liberal opponents, was representative of how Italian Americans had come to view African Americans. His views garnered support from a cross section of New Yorkers, especially white ethnic voters, who were part of a "white ethnic backlash" against the demands of African American Civil Rights proponents. Procaccino's rhetoric was perhaps the last major step by which Italian Americans distanced themselves from their past of racial "in-inbetweeness."[409]

The category of race, much like categories of class and gender, is one of fluidity, rather than rigidity. Southern Italians left Italy with a racial consciousness that would continue to mutate and change as they settled in the United States and confronted unique American racial dynamics. This formative period, whereby Italian immigrants, African Americans, and "white" Americans interacted, served as the cauldron in which racial classifications would be re-shaped and re-made. From the lynching of Frederico Villarosa in 1886 to the candidacy of Mario Procaccino, Italian American constructions of the "darker other," as well as themselves, was in a constant process of flux. Although the Italian immigrant past is replete with an understanding of what it meant to be black in American society, it would be this understanding, as well as their own darker past, that would point subsequent generations towards the once un-attainable goal of whiteness.

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[409] Peter Vellon, "Immigrant Son: Mario Procaccino and the Rise of Conservative Politics in Late 1960s New York City," *Italian American Review*, Volume 7, Number 1, (Spring-Summer 1999), 117-36.

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