

Italian Immigrants, Whiteness, and Race: A Regional Perspective

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Introduction

Conventional scholarly wisdom has it that Italian newcomers to the United States in the decades of mass emigration from Europe between the late 1870s and the early 1920s were not regarded as fully white; rather, they held a middle ground between white and Black people (Orsi 1992; Barrett and Roediger 1997; Fasce 2002; Gardaphé 2004, 123–135; Martinelli 2010; Vellon 2010; Vellon 2018, 213–215; Carlson 2020). In particular, Italian Americans and African Americans initially shared a mutuality of non-whiteness, or, to state it from another perspective, the former revealed some sort of Blackness (Pardini 2017), while the cultures of both minorities somehow overlapped as early as the nineteenth century (Gennari 2017, 9). As this argument continues, it was only by distancing themselves from African Americans and by coming to share the anti-Black attitude of the US mainstream that Italian immigrants and their offspring eventually managed to renegotiate their standing and to have their own whiteness recognized in their adoptive country. Specifically, according to legal scholar David A. J. Richards, the eventual acknowledgment of a white identity in the eyes of public opinion was the outcome of “a Faustian bargain on American racism” (Richards 1999, 189) by which Italian Americans made a point of discriminating against African Americans to gain a place on the white side of the color line. Likewise, in historian Peter G. Vellon’s opinion, shifting from sympathy for the Black victims of lynchings in the South to solidarity toward the perpetrators of mob justice against African Americans by the time of the 1919 race riots was one of the means by which Italian Americans construed their white identity (Vellon 2014, 121–126). Indeed, addressing her Americanized relatives’ attitude in New York City’s the Bronx, poet Rosette Capotorto has recalled, “I was raised to be a racist” (Painter and Capotorto 2003, 254). In this view, whitening became a rite of passage that ensured Americanization by taking a racist route (Lipsitz 1998, 15–18, 95). Such a trajectory, however, was not always linear. As scholar Jessica Barbata Jackson (2020) has shown with specific reference to the Mississippi Delta region, Italian Americans’ accomplishment of whiteness was initially unstable, and they repeatedly moved back and forth across the color line between the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the early post–World War I years, as their

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white status alternated periods of challenges with moments of recognition. In any case, for Italian immigrants and their progeny, color was situational and fluid, changing over time, in terms of both self-affiliation and perception by the larger US society. Consequently, for better or worse, passing was also part of Italian Americans' lives (Belluscio 2006, 19; Gardaphé 2010, 1).

This experience was not exceptional and reflected what happened to other minorities that were not of Anglo-Saxon descent. For instance, the Irish, the Jews, the Greeks, and the Syrians similarly failed to be perceived as white people upon arrival in the United States and consequently suffered from ostracism. They managed to win accommodation only by means of the subsequent acquisition of a white identity (Ignatiev 1995; Brodtkin 1998; Roediger 2002; Roediger 2005; Goldstein 2006; Anagnostou 2008; Gualtieri 2009). As African American author Toni Morrison has suggested in much broader terms, "All immigrants to the United States know (and knew) that if they want to become real, authentic Americans they must . . . emphasize their whiteness. . . . Here, for many people, the definition of 'Americanness' is color" (Morrison 2016).

Historian Thomas A. Guglielmo (2003b) has challenged this interpretation in the case of Italian Americans. In a monograph about the Italian community in Chicago between 1890 and 1945, he has developed Matthew Frye Jacobson's previous insights about the different shades of whiteness for other-than-Anglo-Saxon people in the early twentieth-century American terminology concerning race (Jacobson 1998). On this basis, Guglielmo has drawn a subtle distinction between race and color as the parameters to which coeval US society allegedly resorted to define Italian immigrants' identity. Specifically, Guglielmo has contended that, while the racial perception of the newcomers and their progeny spanned from Mediterranean to either Northern or Southern Italians, according to their different regional origins in the native land, their color was definitely white. As a result, although they suffered from undeniable racial prejudice, stereotypes, bias, and discrimination, Italian immigrants and their children enjoyed what David Roediger (1991) has previously called "the wages of whiteness." As opposed to the marginalization affecting people from non-European backgrounds, such privileged standing meant sharing the benefits of the upper level of the US ladder of color. Consequently, individuals of Italian descent did not face limitations in terms of applying for US citizenship, getting married, owning property, choosing where to live, and accessing material resources from which people of color were long barred.

A few testimonies seem to corroborate Guglielmo's interpretation. For instance, author Louise DeSalvo has recalled that in the naturalization papers of

her grandmother, an immigrant from Southern Italy who moved to New Jersey and became a US citizen during World War II, she was listed as “white” for color. Yet DeSalvo has also perceptively stressed that the clerk who typed her ancestor’s physical description qualified the description of her skin by adding that her complexion was “dark” (DeSalvo 2003, 25–26).

Actually, the findings of Guglielmo’s case study cannot be generalized.¹ In other words, the identity of Chicagoans from Italian background was not necessarily representative of how their fellow ethnics were perceived and treated in other US locales. Indeed, for Italian newcomers, Chicago was an urban milieu of its own whose antagonism toward their national minority was not as strong as in other cities. For example, in Chicago, Italian Americans competed primarily with Polish immigrants, who generally turned out to be less hostile to them than Irish Americans in New York City or Boston, and overall their accommodation within the adoptive society was easier than elsewhere (Nelli 1970; Martellone 1973; Bayor 1978; Moses 2015). For instance, artist Claudia DeMonte has recalled that in New York City “the Irish and the Italians . . . did not get along. The Irish considered us almost black and would call us niggers” (DeMonte 1988, 56).

In order to demonstrate that Italian newcomers were aware of the white-versus-Black divide and placed themselves on the Caucasian side of the color line upon moving to the United States, the late Rudolph J. Vecoli cited a nursery rhyme that his own mother, an immigrant from Camaiore in the province of Lucca, sang to him about Empress Taitu and Emperor Menelik—the Black couple who ruled Ethiopia in the late nineteenth century—and Oreste Barattieri, the white Italian general who made an unsuccessful effort to conquer the country in 1896: “La signora Taitu, Menelik, non lo vol più, ha sposato Barattieri, fa figlioli bianchi e neri” (Vecoli 2006, 98).² Vecoli’s testimony confirms, at least in part, Cristina Lombardi-Diop’s thesis that Italy’s colonialism contributed to shaping both Italian Americans’ sense of belonging and their relations with African Americans in the United States (2015, 91). Nonetheless, the fact that Italian immigrants regarded themselves as white people does not mean that they were perceived as such by the larger society after they settled in the United States. Moreover, Guglielmo seems to have drawn his hypothesis especially from Italian Americans’ legal standing while overlooking their image in the eyes of the general public.

Whether Italian newcomers held the status of white individuals upon landing in the United States, as Guglielmo has contended, or became white in due time by separating themselves from Black people, as Richards has conversely maintained, both currents in whiteness studies generally imply a single nationwide experience that immigrants from Italy shared regardless of

where they set up home in the adoptive society. In addition, they agree that it was primarily the relation with African Americans that eventually determined Italians' standing. Contrary to such normally common points in scholarship, this article intends to complicate the story. It suggests that Italians' regional destinations did affect which side of the color line the newcomers found themselves on. It also proposes that the immigrants' whiteness was not forged only vis-à-vis African Americans but was also the result of interaction with other people of color.

Dynamics of Color in the US North and the South

One can easily take issue with Guglielmo's conclusion. In a famous 1890 testimony before a congressional committee on immigration, James M. Buckley, a former general assistant manager for a railroad company, was asked whether he called an Italian "a white man"; his answer was, "No, sir. An Italian is a dago" (Buckley 1891, 55). The witness, therefore, not only used a notorious term that was insulting toward this ethnic group, but he also explicitly denied that the Italian immigrants could be categorized as white people. *Dago* placed newcomers from Italy "in an indeterminate position between white and black" (Rattansi 2007, 42). Likewise, seven years later, when a superintendent for the Greater Northern Railway Line wanted his labor agent to hire Italian workers for constructions in Duluth, Minnesota, he used the same biased term to identify his preferred nationality and instructed his subordinate to "send more dagos and shut off white men" on the grounds that the latter "will not work" (Michaud 2005, 65). In 1899, using the same offensive word to identify newcomers from Italy, the *Indianapolis News* observed that in southern states "the average man will classify the population as whites, dagoes and negroes" ("Italians in Louisiana," 6). The daily newspaper thereby became one more source implying that Italian Americans' color was not white but something different.

An additional slur that linked Italian newcomers with Black people and questioned their whiteness was "guinea," as the word was previously aimed at African Americans, possibly alluding to the fact that slaves had been imported from the hinterland of the Gulf of Guinea (Martone 2017, 10). The use of another term undermined the idea that Italian Americans were white. To the *New York Times*, Italian newcomers did not belong to the Caucasian group, but they were the "swarthy sons of the Sunny South" ("New Shrine for Italians" 1892, 2) Two years earlier, social documentary photographer Jacob A. Riis (1890, 53) had utilized the same adjective, *swarthy*, to describe an Italian immigrant in New York City.

Federal institutions also contributed to undercutting Italian Americans' whiteness. The final report of the Congressional Joint Immigration Commission, the so-called Dillingham Committee, released in 1911, stressed a likely "infusion of African blood" among Sicilians (US Senate 1911, 1:250). This thesis was not surprising since the document drew in part upon the pseudoscientific theories of such Italian positivist anthropologists as Giuseppe Sergi and Luigi Pigorini, who contended that their people had originated from central-eastern Africa (Deschamps 2000, 61–66; Pizzato 2017, 85–86). By the same token, a few members of the Committee on Immigration and Naturalization of the US House of Representatives doubted that at least Southern Italians were "full-blooded Caucasian" (US House of Representatives 1912, 77–78). Economist Robert E. Foerster observed after World War I that Italian newcomers were denied "whiteness . . . with considerable frequency" (Foerster 1919, 408). Actually, in compliance with the one-drop rule, the contention by which an African ancestor turned any individual into an African person, Italian immigrants could be easily considered as Black people (Petrovich Njegosh 2012, 25–26).

As the previous quotation from the *Indianapolis News* suggests, especially in the South the mainly dark-skinned immigrants from the *Meridione* seemed closer to Black than to white people in a supposed hierarchy of color. Italian travelers to this section of the country complained that their fellow citizens were treated as if they were Black people (Sanfilippo 2002, 69–70). These eyewitnesses included Edmondo Mayor des Planches, Italy's ambassador in Washington from 1901 to 1910, who contended that Italians "hold a racial middle ground between whites and blacks" (Mayor des Planches 1913, 144). Therefore, the immigrants' phenotype and specifically their pigmentation contributed to distancing Italian Americans from white people. Even actor Rudolph Valentino, who was "very dark in complexion" (Bertellini 2019, 110) by his own admission, had to take trouble in distinguishing himself from Black people in order to become acceptable to the US movie industry. Valentino allegedly used pink powder to bleach his skin and avoided basking in the sun at length to prevent his pigmentation from looking darker (Bertellini 2019, 110). Ordinary Italian Americans also struggled to achieve a "white" and "Anglo-Saxon" identity as a key to success in the interwar years (Wirth 2015, 214). Poet and novelist Rachel Guido de Vries (2003, 84) has recalled that, as late as the end of the 1960s, "I begin to feel that my nose is enormous, that I reek of garlic, that I must lower my voice to pass. Passing for white."

The immigrants and their progeny often shared conditions of peonage with Black people in southern rural counties to which they were lured as a specific replacement for the African American workforce by regional establishments

looking for field hands and sharecroppers rather than by new landowners (Milani 1991; Clune 2005, 202–205). A variety of compulsory labor for debts, peonage was usually regarded as analogous to slavery, which helped blend the position of African Americans and Italian Americans in southern society (Daniel 1972, 94, 103, 152). As they were subjected to involuntary servitude, along with intimidation and legally tolerated frauds in the payment of their agricultural work, immigrants from Italy could hardly benefit from the privileges allegedly resulting from their white status (Wyatt-Brown 1993).

African Americans and Italian Americans also toiled shoulder to shoulder and brushed elbows on the sugarcane, cotton, and rice plantations in Louisiana, Alabama, and Arkansas. They also teamed together in the coke ovens and the blast furnaces of Birmingham's developing industrial district (Slavcheff 1994, 239). Such proximity further blurred the differences between Italian Americans and Black people, or at least separated the immigrants from the white group. For example, in a dramatization of the real Italian experience in Arkansas's Sunnyside Plantation in the early twentieth century, author Mary Bucci Bush has one of her characters say, "We're not white. . . . We're Italian" (Bush 2011, 228).

This fictional quotation does not necessarily reflect ethnic pride. Actually, historian Robert L. Brandfon has suggested that "by replacing the Negro in the same type of work and under the same conditions, the Italians assumed the status of Negroes" (Brandfon 1964, 610) in southern states. Newcomers from Italy were initially recruited as a supposedly more reliable and less indolent alternative to Black people (Stone 1908, 115–123, 188–208; Milani 1987). For example, according to the Louisiana Sugar Planters' Association, Italian Americans were "hard-working, thrifty, and content with few comforts" (Sitterson 1953, 315). But, ironically, as they performed African Americans' jobs in agriculture, they ended up losing their Caucasian characterization in the eyes of native white people. The blackening of Italian workers because of their proximity to African American co-laborers occurred in other occupational fields, too. For instance, in Texas, after confining membership to individuals "born of white parents," the Railroad Brotherhoods attempted to pass an amendment to their charter to the effect that "no member shall work on any job with a negro or Italian" (Kelly 2001, 111).

Contrary to Guglielmo's thesis that Italian Americans' civil rights did not face challenges due to the newcomers' supposed whiteness, during the 1906 gubernatorial election campaign in Mississippi, candidates discussed whether Italian immigrants' children should be confined to segregated schools ("Italians a Race Issue" 1906). Furthermore, in the Delta region, a few "white" schools did exclude Italian newcomers' children at the turn of the twentieth

century (Kelly 2001, 43; Cosco 2003, 16). Italian Americans' fuzzy color had additional legal consequences. Notably, as late as 1922, the conviction of Jim Rollins, an African American man, for miscegenation in Jim Crow Alabama was overturned on appeal on the grounds of the lack of scientific proof that Edith Labue, the Sicilian woman with whom he had been found, was white (*Rollins v. State* 1922). Rollins's acquittal may have resulted from a mere "technicality," namely the state's failure to demonstrate that Labue was white, as legal historian Ariela J. Gross (2008, 230–231) has contended. But the very fact that the whiteness of a Sicilian could not be taken for granted and had to be proved in court pointed to Italian Americans' uncertain position along the color line in the eyes of southern public opinion. In addition, whether Rollins and Labue were caught in bed or just "standing and fully dressed" but "alone together in a dark room," as scholar Charles F. Robinson II (2003, 105–106) has stressed in order to show that miscegenation laws aimed at preventing intimacy rather than sexuality across the color line, is irrelevant in this context because the point is that Sicilianness did not yet equal whiteness automatically in Alabama in the early 1920s.

The case of Labue was an illuminating example of the instability of Italian Americans' whiteness. Jacobson, who inspired Guglielmo's distinction between race and color, has placed Italian newcomers among the "probationary white races" from Europe because they managed to come to the United States as "free white persons," but they "could also lose their status by their association with nonwhite groups" (Jacobson 1998, 57). Immigrants from Italy did not refrain from living with Black partners or having occasional sexual relations with them even in the segregationist southern states that forbade interracial sex and consequently marriage (Scala 1913, 19). Their own behavior, therefore, contributed to placing Italian Americans outside the white cohort of the US population (Cunningham 1965). These conscious or unconscious challenges to Jim Crow practices definitely helped consolidate Italian Americans' position on the other-than-white side of the color line.

Such intermingling was not confined to the South, nor was it limited to sexual life. The worship of Black Madonnas and saints such as Benedict the Moor, along with the refusal to reject African Americans' informal participation in religious processions in their honor in northern urban neighborhoods such as East Harlem, further blurred Italian Americans' color in the eyes of the broader US society (Orsi 1992; Birnbaum 1993; D'Angelo 1996). In addition to the ambiguities of complexion, the experience of discrimination often brought Italian Americans and African Americans together; Mafia-related stereotypes for the former and antebellum slavery for the latter were similar social stigmas that caused an analogous marginalization for both minorities (Cinel 1990).

Lynchings, particularly in southern states, were the greatest infringement of Italian Americans' civil rights because of their perceived color and association with Black people. Starting with the case of Federico Villarosa, who was a victim of mob violence in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1886 following the charge of having assaulted a thirteen-year-old white girl, at least thirty-four Italian newcomers—mainly dark-skinned Sicilian immigrants—were victims of extralegal popular justice until 1910: Two men were lynched in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1889; eleven in New Orleans in 1891; three in Hanville, Louisiana, in 1896; five in Tallulah, Louisiana, in 1899; two in Erwin, Mississippi, in 1901; one in Ashdown, Arkansas, in 1901; one in Davis, West Virginia, in 1903; and two in Tampa, Florida, in 1910 (Webb 2002; Ferraioli 2013, 533–552; Famà Stahle 2016, 49–108; Salvetti 2017). This kind of extrajudicial retribution was generally applied to Black people and people whose white identity was at least dubious. Notably, the New Orleans lynching was an act of vengeance and racial hate resulting from the assassination of David C. Hennessy, the local chief of police. Before dying, Hennessy reportedly whispered, “The Dagos did it” (Baiamonte 1992, 122). In so doing he therefore referred to his supposed murderers by the same derogatory word that denied Italians full whiteness.

Mob summary justice against Italians was not confined to the South. For instance, in Colorado, seven immigrants in total fell victims to extralegal retribution in Gunnison in 1890, in Denver in 1893, and in Walsenburg in 1895 (Rolle 1968, 174–175; Woodall 1990). Nine years later, Albert Piazza was lynched in Willisville, Illinois, having been arrested after taking part in a lethal brawl. In 1905, in the same state, a posse hanged a Sicilian immigrant, Joe Speranza alias Joseph Strando,³ while he was awaiting trial on charges of killing a mine superintendent in Johnston City (Watson 1916, 561–568). Curiously, Guglielmo (2003b, 27) too has noted the latter incident, although the lynching hardly fits his interpretation. Indeed, this mining town was located fewer than three hundred miles from Chicago, where the victim's alleged white color might have spared his life, at least according to Guglielmo's thesis. Willisville is situated only a little farther, roughly 330 miles, from the Windy City. Still, as Dominic Pulera has argued, “Speranza died at least in part because he was visibly different from the native-born white majority in Johnston City. . . . The lynch mob almost certainly did not see him as a ‘white’ man, at least in the same way that the men of English, Irish, and German ancestry were considered white” (Pulera 2004, 23).

Italian Americans themselves were aware that it was their blending with African Americans that made them subject to lynching. For instance, after Tampa's 1910 incident, the New York City–based daily newspaper *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* revealed the immigrants' sense of insecurity about their color

by remarking that “those who know statistics about lynching are aware that the victims are black people. Europeans have not been lynched except for Italians only. In fact, a white person—probably a Bulgarian—was lynched in Baton Rouge in 1907. Yet it was a misunderstanding. The thugs actually intended to give chase to Italian laborers” (“All’indomani dell’eccidio di Tampa” 1910, 1).

It can be argued that it was the failure to ascribe a white identity to Italian newcomers or the latter’s inability to behave how white people were expected to that caused the lynching of the immigrants and their offspring. John Higham, for instance, has contended that summary justice against Italian newcomers arose from the fact that they “violated the white man’s code” because they associated with African Americans “nearly on terms of equality” (Higham 1981, 169).

Newspaper accounts of the 1899 lynching of the five Sicilians in Tallulah offer a case in point. The victims were killed after they tried to murder—but managed only to wound—the local coroner, following an argument over a goat (Haas 1982; Deaglio 2015). Yet other aspects of their behavior located them toward the Black side of the color line. The Sicilians were storekeepers who were held up to public scorn because they had given their African American and white employees equal pay (Olson 1994, 173).

It has also been contended that the lynching of Italian newcomers fell within the category of “white-on-white” violence (Jäger 2002; Spickard 2007, 249–250). Yet, in the case of Tallulah, press reports focused on the perception of the immigrants’ color to explain their plight. For example, *Harper’s Weekly* remarked that, in the opinion of Tallulah’s residents, the Italian newcomers deserved the same treatment as an African American who shot at or assassinated a white man—namely, lynching without trial—because they could hardly be considered as white people (Walker 1899). Likewise, the *New Orleans Times-Democrat* observed that, in Tallulah, “the people believe that they were justified in the action they took” because what was at stake in the incident was the “maintenance of white supremacy at any cost,” a condition that had been challenged by the Sicilians’ attempt on the Caucasian sheriff’s life (“Citizens Plead Necessity” 1899, 1). In addition, a few years later, in one of the first academic studies about lynching that included a racial breakdown of the victims, sociologist James Elbert Cutler (1905) listed the data about the Italian casualties under the category of people who were neither “negroes” nor “whites.”

The enforcement of white supremacy against Italian Americans also implied obstructing their voting rights. Italy’s consular agent in New Orleans reported that the Tallulah lynching went beyond retribution for attempted murder and included the intimidation of naturalized immigrants among its aims out of a “desire to prevent the Italians from casting their ballots” (Piazza

1899). In his view, the problem was their growing influence in local politics as a swing constituency that, albeit rather small, could decide the outcome of elections in a township where registered voters numbered fewer than one hundred and fifty. Actually, if lynching was among the means to intimidate and to disfranchise Black people in the post-Reconstruction South, it is reasonable to assume that the same strategy was used to interfere with Italian Americans' suffrage. Indeed, scholar Kate McCullough has remarked in much broader terms that "the lynching of the Italians produces an effect similar to the lynching of the African Americans: it terrorizes the community under attack and reinforces the white populations' sense of power" (McCullough 1999, 77). In this perspective, too, lynching arose from the denial of Italian Americans' whiteness.

Even if southern states let naturalized Italian immigrants cast their ballots, doing so did not mean recognizing their white color in the eyes of the Jim Crow society. For example, the 1898 constitutional convention of Louisiana, which dodged the Fifteenth Amendment to disfranchise African Americans by the introduction of property and literacy requirements, exempted naturalized foreign-born citizens from such provisions and, consequently, did not violate the voting rights of Americanized Italian immigrants. This, however, hardly meant recognition of their whiteness. Indeed, Italian newcomers came to be contemptuously called the "privileged dagoes" (State of Louisiana 1898, 130). They were not white, according to the local press. The *Franklin News* remarked that the convention made "the Dagoes citizens and disfranchise[d] the Negro, and God knows if there is any difference between them," while the *Homer Clipper* observed that Italians were "as black as the blackest Negro in existence" (Cunningham 1965, 34).

Italian immigrants also suffered from forms of social ostracism resulting from their color-related connection with African Americans even outside the South. For example, the Washington League of Knights and Ladies—a fraternal society that was established in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1902—banned Italian Americans and Black people alike from membership in the early twentieth century (Vecoli 1995, 156).

Acknowledgment of Italian immigrants' dark color also limited their choice as to where they could take up residence. For instance, in 1892, the *Seattle-Press Times* pointed out that about 175 Italian laborers lived in quarters segregated from those of their "white" co-workers in the yards of the Monte Cristo Railroad in Skagit County, Washington, because "Italians and Chinese are not regarded as belonging to the Caucasian race" ("A Murder Avenged" 1892, 1).

There were also long-term violations of Guglielmo's supposed privileges of Italian Americans as white people. As late as 1966, for instance, Joseph

Fitzsimmons, the welfare commissioner of upstate New York's Ulster County, rejected the petition of a couple of Italian extraction who wished to adopt a blue-eyed and blonde-haired four-and-a-half-year-old girl. The reason for the denial was that the couple represented inappropriate parents on the grounds of their "coloring and ethnic background" (Asbury 1966, 23). As *The Crisis*—the mouthpiece of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People—commented the following year, "the case . . . was a barbed reminder that some Americans do not consider the Italians 'quite white'" (Moon 1967, 148).⁴

The coloring of Italian Americans affected popular culture, too. For instance, Marina Cacioppo has pointed out that in *The New Orleans Mafia; or Chief of Police Hennessy Avenged* (an early fictional account of the New Orleans 1891 lynchings published in the same year by an imaginary Police Captain Howard), "Right from the start, the descriptions of Italians are clearly marked by non-white racial features" (Cacioppo 2005, 23). Similarly, the characterization of newcomers from Italy as "dark" people as opposed to white individuals of Anglo-Saxon ancestry shaped the portraits of criminals from Italian background in the early twentieth-century dime novels (Caronia 2019, esp. 218–220).

The Perspective from California

Like the South, California points to a different story of Italian Americans' acceptance as whites. In this state in general and specifically in San Francisco, where the largest Italian settlement on the Pacific coast was located (Fichera 2011), the existence of large numbers of Hispanics as well as of immigrants from China and Japan placed minorities other than African Americans at the bottom of the hierarchy of color (Almaguer 1994). The presence of many Asians, for whom Italian immigrants could not be easily mistaken on the account of their pigmentation, usually prevented native whites from challenging Italian Americans' whiteness. For instance, in 1895, the *San Francisco Chronicle* article "A School Where Children of Many Races Meet" did attribute a "brunette" complexion to Italian immigrants, but the newspaper also conceded that the color of their skin was "lighter" than that of Hispanics. The white-versus-Asian polarization of California's society placed Italian newcomers and their children solidly among Caucasians (Caiazza 2018).

It was not unusual for Italian immigrants to the West Coast to be called the "Chinese of Europe." Still, this definition had less to do with color or racial classification than with the kind of jobs they performed. The expression resulted primarily from the fact that Italian immigrants tended to rely on labor agents to find work. What placed these newcomers within the same category as the

Chinese in the eyes of the larger Californian society was not the pigmentation; that is, the idea that their complexion was supposedly other than white. Rather it was the awareness that Italians generally resorted to a *padrone*, a labor contractor, and were bound to this figure by the *bossatura*, that is, the payment for the services of the boss.⁵ As the coolie and *padrone* systems became confused in the view of native white Californians, so did the members of the Chinese and Italian minorities, regardless of the color of the skin (Gabaccia 1997).

However, in California the great bulk of unskilled laborers resulted from the Chinese immigration wave rather than from its Italian counterpart (Fichera 2011, 48). In addition, Italian Americans rushed to distance themselves from Asians and to side with white people almost as soon as they settled along the West Coast. Their fellow Italians in the South were slower in disassociating themselves from the local workforce of color; indeed, these Italian Americans parted from African Americans only after the escalation of lynchings in the late nineteenth century, when they realized that interaction with Black people and the resulting precarious white identity jeopardized their own personal security. The turning point was the 1891 lynchings in New Orleans (Gambino 1998). Following this murderous event, Italian Americans no longer felt safe in befriending Black people in the South. In Louisiana they even discontinued their work in the sugar-cane plantations lest they be associated with the African American labor force (Scarpaci 1978). Since violence resulting from their blurred identity pushed in-between people into the white camp for safety reasons, namely to avoid the bloody types of retribution that were usually inflicted on African Americans, their behavior corroborates Grace Elizabeth Hale's thesis that lynchings not only aimed at intimidating Black people but were also instrumental in defining racial lines and consolidating whiteness in postbellum southern society (Hale 1998, 199–239). In the case of Italian Americans, too, lynchings were central to “white racial group formation” (Smångs 2017) within a regional context in which violence long resulted from challenges to white supremacy (Santangeli Valenzani 2020).

Louisiana's pattern partially replicated itself in other milieux. For instance, also in Brazos County, Texas, Italian Americans learned to claim whiteness for self-protection, which involved showing off hostility toward African Americans in the mid-1890s (Nevels 2007, 85–89). By the same token, after realizing the social benefits of being characterized by a white identity, Italian Americans in Baltimore embraced the racist premises of the local political leadership in the early twentieth century and joined two campaigns that unsuccessfully aimed at disfranchising African Americans in 1905 and 1909 by amending the state constitution (Shufelt 2000).

Californians of Italian descent claimed whiteness differently and earlier. Andrea Sbarboro, an immigrant from Liguria who became a prominent wine producer, was an early advocate of the exclusion of Chinese newcomers. In 1860, he helped the xenophobic Native Sons of the Golden West to establish anti-Chinese clubs in the San Francisco area (Dillon and Davis 1985, 20). Besides refusing to hire Asians and Hispanics in his vineyard company, Sbarboro also encouraged the arrivals of his fellow countrymen to keep California's workforce "white" and to prevent the "orientalization" of the state (Cinotto 2012, 30, 50). According to Sbarboro, Japanese immigrants were "a menacing danger" to the United States, the kind of threat white people like Italian vineyard owners had long realized (Asiatic Exclusion League 1908, 15).

Other Italian Californians shared Sbarboro's stand along the color line. As early as 1862, for instance, San Francisco's fishermen of Italian extraction came out against the repeal of a state license tax against their Chinese competitors. Their argument was that the provision was necessary for the "protection of the white fishermen against the encroachments of the Mongolians" (McEvoy 1990, 97).

The debate on the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Bill offered a case in point for Italian Americans' distinct color-related positions resulting from their diverse geographical settings. On the one hand, Italian Americans in eastern and southern states criticized the intent of this proposed piece of legislation because they feared that its enactment would also bring influxes from Italy to a halt. Such a concern was not unreasonable. Indeed, a few years later, the New Orleans Committee of Fifty, a blue-ribbon group of prominent residents, called for a ban on Italian newcomers as an extension of the anti-Chinese law (Boiten 1979, 276). As Peter Vellon has pointed out, "the area of immigration restriction and exclusion" generated "mutual sympathy" (Vellon 2014, 69) between Italian Americans and the Chinese outside the West. But Italian Americans ultimately revealed anti-Asian stereotypes and racist views, too. For instance, the former commissioner of immigration Edward Corsi stigmatized the supposed indolence of the Chinese people in his 1935 semi-autobiographical account *In the Shadow of Liberty* (Battisti 2018, 184).

On the other hand, Californians from Italian background endorsed the 1882 provision (Deschamps 2010). Specifically, Sbarboro was among the promoters of San Francisco's Anti-Chinese League (eventually becoming its treasurer), an organization that lobbied for the passing of the legislative measure. Remarkably, he based his call for a law prohibiting Chinese immigration to the United States on the grounds that the fluxes from the Far East were "detrimental to the best interests of the white race" ("Anti Chinese" 1882, 2). In a speech before the Chinese Exclusion Convention that convened in 1902

to support the extension of the 1882 legislation beyond its planned expiration that same year, Sbarboro incorporated the Italians and other nationalities of southern and eastern European origins into the white race along with people of Anglo-Saxon extraction (Lee 2003, 37–38). Conversely, his fellow ethnics on the East Coast began to stress the virtues and contribution to American civilization of their specific national group as a racial minority of its own in an attempt at shielding Italians from immigration restriction (Mariano 1921). Against this backdrop, Italian Americans in the West entered Richards’s “Faustian” deal much earlier than newcomers in the South and the East. They also elaborated it out of anti-Asian attitudes rather than by antagonizing Black people.

Californians of Italian ancestry obviously distanced themselves from African Americans too. For example, in late April 1939, the residents of San Francisco’s Little Italy established the North Beach Boosters’ Association to curb Black residents’ resettlement in this area on the grounds that the presence of African Americans would downgrade the standards of living in the district (“Il brillante successo” 1939; Rainaldi 1939). This campaign, however, went hand in hand with the efforts to prevent the inroads of Chinatown into North Beach. Both initiatives strengthened Italian Americans’ white identity rather than their ethnic sense of belonging. For instance, the following year, on the occasion of the celebration of Columbus Day, the *Little City News*—a North Beach neighborhood weekly—characterized the Genoese sailor as a white person rather than as an Italian: “We are proud of Columbus. . . . We are proud that as a white man he was, for all practical purposes, the first American!” (“Why Ignore Columbus” 1940, 1).

Italian Americans’ standing on the white side of the color line had narrative echoes, too. For instance, in John Fante’s novels set in the Great Depression-era Golden State, such as *Ask the Dust* and *The Road to Los Angeles*, the fictional main character of Italian descent, Arturo Bandini, boasts of his whiteness while confronting his Mexican-American mistress, Camilla Lopez, and his Filipino co-workers (Elliott 2010; Bordin 2019, 159–166). Yet it was not only California’s Italian Americans who thought of themselves as being white; they were perceived as such also by the larger society in this state, primarily because—as Sbarboro’s experience demonstrated—they were available to participate in the system of the anti-Asian exclusion (Caiazza 2019). For example, the Order of the Caucasians, a white advocacy group, let second-generation Italian American Anthony Caminetti, who would later oppose Asian immigration as a congressman and as the US immigration commissioner in the Wilson administration, join the organization and even chose him as an officer of its chapter in Jackson, California, as early as 1876, when the association started a harsh campaign against Chinese newcomers (Lee 2003, 73–74). Likewise, in 1881,

while discussing the diverse range of complexion among the world's peoples, the *Sacramento Daily Record-Union* placed Italians among the “dark whites of southern Europe” (“Color of the Different Races” 1881, 3). Four years later, the nativist White Labor League lobbied for the dismissal of the Chinese from San Francisco's tobacco plants and for their replacement with Caucasian cigar makers. Yet it raised no objection to Italian immigrants' employment in the tobacco industry (Cinel 1982, 17).

At the turn of the twentieth century, to Congregationalist Minister Dana Webster Bartlett, the director of the Bethlehem Institute, a social service center for immigrants in Los Angeles, the city's Italians were “quickly becoming Americanized” (Bartlett 1907, 79) because, unlike Chinese and Mexican immigrants, they were of Caucasian extraction. A similar characterization shaped the perception of Italian newcomers by the San Francisco-based Asiatic Exclusion League. This organization regarded immigrants from Italy “as a breakwater between the Asiatic and the American laborer” and commended Sbarboro because he made a point of employing his fellow countrymen instead of Japanese workers (Asiatic Exclusion League 1907, 8). Remarkably, after a Santa Rosa newspaper had listed Italians among other-than-white groups such as “Indians” in statistics about arrests for drunkenness, a reader, a pastor by the name of J. M. Cassin (1909), objected that this depiction was absurd and outrageous. By the same token, implying Italian Americans' affiliation with the white race, a Fresno newspaper editor named Chester Harvey Rowell observed that marriage between a Japanese and a white equaled “a sort of international adultery” in California. Therefore, “for the hand of any American's daughter . . . an Italian of the commonest standing and qualities would be a more welcomed suitor than the finest man from Japan” (Daniels 1998, 117).

After all, a San Franciscan banker of Genoese ancestry, Frank Belgrano Jr., rose to influential roles within the American Legion. This organization of veterans fought against the alleged mongrelization of the United States by other-than-white groups such as Africans, Asians, and Hispanics (American Legion of California 1923, 58), besides supporting the Asian exclusion clause in the 1924 Johnson-Reed Immigration Act so as to protect the supposed white essence of US society (Lukens 2012, 33). Belgrano became the leader of the association in California in 1930 and had even reached the top position of national commander by 1935, when he voiced former servicemen's claims in an in-person meeting with President Franklin D. Roosevelt (Rumer 1990, 548, 566; Ortiz 2010, 117).

Contrary to the influxes from Italy to both the East Coast and the South, most immigrants to California, including Sbarboro's and Belgrano's parents, had arrived from the northern regions of the peninsula. In particular, by the

mid-1930s, only 36 percent of San Francisco's Italian-born residents had come from the *Meridione*, as opposed to 54 percent from northern sections and 10 percent from central areas (Radin 1935, 39). The sizable influx of light-skinned Northern Italians to California prevented the color status of this minority from being unclear. It also contributed to the identification of Italian immigrants with Caucasians in the eyes of the public, unlike what happened in the East against the backdrop of the mass waves of olive-complexioned southerners with dark hair and low foreheads that made them look more similar to Africans than to white Europeans (D'Agostino 2002).

The northern background of many Italian immigrants in San Francisco facilitated their acceptance by the larger host society. Remarkably, in the early twentieth century, the *New York Times* construed the local Little Italy in the Mulberry Street area as a dangerous and threatening place, whereas the *San Francisco Chronicle* presented the Bay City's Italian community in the North Beach district as a picturesque and exotic neighborhood (Serra 2009, 35–95).

Conclusion

With few exceptions, scholarship has examined Italian Americans' identity mainly within a somehow rigid Black-and-white frame. For instance, Steve Garner (2004, 189) has argued that immigrants from Italy “had to negotiate their identities in the framework of a black-white binary.” Ensuing analysis has resulted in a nationwide single narrative that, notwithstanding the inclusion of the diverse shades of both colors, has paid only cursory attention to geographical variables and interaction with people of color other than African Americans while outlining a timeline in Italian Americans' march from a halfway position between Blackness and whiteness to a full-fledged white identity.⁶

This article has offered a few comparative glimpses about Italian Americans' color in the northern, southern, and western sections of the United States vis-à-vis not only Black people but also Asians and Hispanics. It has contrasted Italians' belated identity as Caucasians in the North and the South with their early positioning among whites in the West. Such dynamics suggest that the development of Italian Americans' whiteness depended not only on time but also on geography.

Notes

1. For Guglielmo's attempt at applying his conclusion about Chicago beyond the Windy City, see Guglielmo (2003a).
2. “Mrs. Taitu does not want Menelik anymore she married Barattieri, she now gives birth to white and black children” (translation mine).

3. Joseph Strando was the name of the victim, according to the *Urbana Daily Courier* (“Lynch Murderer” 1915).
4. After court litigation, the adoption was eventually permitted (Hauser 1968, 771).
5. For details about the *padrone* system, see Nelli (1964).
6. For a criticism of this approach, see also Caiazza (2017, 149–152).

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