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HOW THE ITALIAN-AMERICAN DREAM BECAME A RACIAL NIGHTMARE

by Isabel Robertson



Illustration by Gabriela Sibilska

On May 31st, I got an email notification from a neighborhood-based social media site called Nextdoor. I generally ignore these—I hadn't seen any lost cats lately. But this was just six days after the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police. Protesters were already flooding the streets across the country to demonstrate against police brutality and systemic racism, and this Nextdoor subject line caught my attention: "[Little Italy and Peaceful Protesters](#)." There was a video attached, and the caption read, in part: "Today, my friends and I went to go peacefully protest at Little Italy...All we did was stand on the sidewalk across from Corbo's Bakery with our signs...They began to chase us, assault us, they hit my friend in the face, threw my friend's phone, they ripped my sign, threw beer bottles at us and called us slurs...People in Cleveland, if you aren't aware of their racism and bigotry now, here's your chance to become aware."

"They" refers to Little Italy residents and employees of a stalwart local Italian bakery, Corbo's. This bakery has another location in downtown Cleveland, and during a Black Lives Matter protest the previous day, the owner and his two sons stood outside brandishing firearms, [purportedly](#) to protect their storefront. For context: the day before, the protests had escalated due in part to police employing tear gas and flash grenades, until some fraction of protesters (or those posing as protesters) smashed and vandalized downtown storefronts. However, other businesses managed to avoid or recover from property damage without wielding guns.

I read the many comments on this Nextdoor post, and two things struck me: first, the stories of racism in Little Italy that commenters shared (slurs, racist landlords, muggings, restaurant workers spitting in food) and second, the number of white people surprised by these stories. I do not have the lived experiences that my Black neighbors have, explaining the wide berth they often give to Cleveland's Little Italy. But several Black Clevelanders chimed in to this Nextdoor thread, expressing their lack of surprise. They wrote: "There had been a very long history of racism in Little Italy...Ask older black folks they'll tell you!" and "As an African-American woman, I am not

patronizing Little Italy. It is a known area unwelcoming to POC.” In other words, Black Clevelanders could have told the white people that Little Italy would react that way—throwing bottles and foul language.

Aggressive racist responses to Black Lives Matter protests were certainly not exclusive to Italian-American communities, but this incident in Cleveland’s Little Italy serves as a strong example of a 19th and 20th century American tale: a European immigrant group arrives on our shores, they are badly treated and discriminated against, they fight their way out of said abuse in part by mistreating Black Americans, and they are rewarded with the privileges of whiteness. The anti-Black racism lingers even after their whiteness is secure, firmly entrenched in the white American psyche.

Not Yet White

Why does anti-Black racism exist in Little Italy? Of course, for the same reasons it exists within all white Americans—we have been raised and socialized within a system of white supremacy. As Ijeoma Oluo writes, “You are racist because you were born and bred in a racist, white supremacist society...There is no way you can inherit white privilege from birth, learn racist white supremacist history in schools, consume racist and white supremacist movies and films, work in a racist and white supremacist workforce, and vote for racist and white supremacist governments and not be racist.”

But in the early 20th century, ethnic immigrant groups like Poles, Slavs, Greeks, Eastern European Jews, and Italians were not yet considered to be white, and such powerful status would not necessarily be granted passively. These immigrant groups were therefore incentivized to actively seek whiteness. But not everyone is given the opportunity to “achieve” whiteness in America. Who exactly is eligible has changed dramatically over the country’s history, but one constant has remained true: Black Americans are not eligible for the privileges of whiteness.

The historic patterns Italians and others (Poles, Slavs, Greeks, Eastern European Jews, and more) experienced from being victims of racial discrimination to perpetrators of it are instructive. They helped cement anti-Black racism as a fundamental tenet of what it means to be an “American.” As Nell Irvin Painter writes in [*The History of White People*](#), “being a real American often meant joining antiblack racism and seeing oneself as white against the blacks.” And not only did these European immigrant groups begin to see themselves as white by espousing anti-Black racism, but other white people began to accept them as white too.



Italian-Americans in New York watching a flag raising ceremony, 1942. Library of Congress

By exploring the anti-Italian racism of the past and examining how they and other ethnic groups managed to become definitively white, we can better understand the depth of anti-Black racism in this country. The truth is that Italians *were not white* in the late 19th and early 20th century—not in Cleveland and not anywhere else in America. They were banned from some [employment](#), [abused and assaulted](#), and were even the victims of [lynchings](#)—white supremacy’s harshest sentence. In the 1890s, a journalist asked a construction boss point-blank if an Italian is a white man, to which he responded, “No sir, an Italian is a Dago.”

Italians’ racial status was also made abundantly clear in court cases and quests to disenfranchise; legally, Italians’ status as white was suspect. In a 1922 Alabama court case, [Rollins v. State](#), a Black man was acquitted on miscegenation charges because his Sicilian partner was not “conclusively white.” In 1898 in Louisiana, there was a debate at the state constitutional convention regarding disenfranchisement of Black Americans and certain ethnic populations—namely Italians—who were considered racially ambiguous. Lawmakers argued that, even though Italian skin “happens to be white...according to the spirit of our meaning when we speak of ‘white man’s government,’ [Italians] are as black as the blackest negro in existence.” Though, the fact that their skin “happened to be white” was more than an inconvenient truth that Louisiana lawmakers needed to talk their way around. Italians’ skin color and European ancestry was key to Italian-Americans’ ability to move out of that racialized past.

Italians’ initial non-white status was inextricably tied to the Black experience, as they were generally seen as more similar to Black Americans than to white Americans. There were many

reasons for this, including the perception of Southern Italians as [racially inferior](#) and “of African blood” back in Italy and American stereotypes of [both groups](#) as criminal.

Anti-Italian sentiment was linked to anti-Black racism through language, too. One of the most pervasive anti-Italian slurs, “ginney” or “guinea,” evolved from anti-Black vocabulary. As David Roediger outlines in his book [Working Toward Whiteness](#), guineas were gold coins named for their role in the African slave trade. Guinea, a stretch of the West African coast from Sierra Leone to Benin, also gave its name to slave dealers known as guinea merchants. As Roediger writes, “no object better symbolized the relationships among the primitive accumulation of capital, the commodification of black bodies, and the deep associations of whiteness and property than guinea currency.” The word went on to become a slur for Black Americans from the 1740s to the late 1800s in the phrase “guinea negro.” But by the 1890s and into the 20th century, the term had organically shifted to refer to Italians—a commentary on their supposedly darker skin and the many comparisons drawn between the two groups.

Italian-Americans were not deaf to those comparisons—[stereotypes of criminality](#), [untrustworthiness](#), and other undesirable traits. The desires to distance themselves from these labels and to physically [distance themselves](#) from Black neighbors in crowded city spaces were compounded by a keen awareness of the privileges associated with whiteness. This alchemy gave “Italians a particular anxiety to assert a white identity.” Jennifer Guglielmo argues in the introduction to [Are Italians White?](#) that this anxiety embedded itself in Italian immigrant communities as a way “to effectively distance themselves from their Brown and Black neighbors and receive the ample rewards that come with being white.”

A Trajectory Towards Whiteness

Unlike Black Americans, Italian-Americans were afforded a trajectory towards whiteness, and there were massive social and economic privileges to be gained from achieving it. While this is not to say that every person of now-white ethnic origin in the early 20th century made a conscious decision to adopt anti-Black racism in order to achieve their own whiteness, this was certainly the case for some. In [The History of Whiteness](#), Painter quotes an Italian-American man accepting a “tempting invitation.” He recalled “standing on a corner [when] a guy would throw the door open and say, ‘Come on down.’ They were goin’ to Harlem to get in the riot. They’d say, ‘Let’s beat up some n****s.’ It was wonderful. It was new. The Italo-Americans stopped being Italo and started becoming Americans. We joined the group.”



Cleveland police arrest a youth in connection with the fatal shooting of Benoris Toney during the 1966 Hough riots. Two Little Italy residents were charged with the crime. Cleveland Memory Project

Generally speaking though, this was a subconscious shift. Italians and other white ethnic immigrants learned anti-Black racism the way all white people do—it was all around them in their new country, taught implicitly and explicitly through school segregation, dolls and toys with racist imagery, racist advertisements, even amusement park games called “hit the n*****.” Historian David Roediger also highlights the importance of things like “blackface entertainments, the ‘coon songs’ in the Sunday comics, [and] a blockbuster film like *Birth of a Nation* in teaching new immigrants the racial ropes of the United States.” And this racist education, whether conscious or subconscious or both, was eagerly absorbed. As the poet Diane Di Prima wrote, the white identity which would clear Italians of the harassment and abuse they suffered at the hands of native-born white Americans was “something that many Italian-Americans grabbed at with both hands.”

But Italians’ white status is no longer in question. In fact, in recent decades, some Italian-Americans have been vocal members of white supremacist groups. People like [Christian Picciolini](#), a now-reformed former leader in the white power movement, demonstrate a full 180-degree shift in racial identity. Immigration restrictions of the 1920s helped push Italians toward whiteness, as did both World Wars, the New Deal, and post-World War II housing laws. But regardless of when and how exactly they completed their arc to whiteness, it is crystal clear that Italians were once not white, and now they are.

So if they are definitely white today, why does that anxiety to assert whiteness still rear its head? Why did Little Italy’s residents respond with aggression to the dozen or so teenage protesters expressing their outrage at George Floyd’s murder? Why did the Corbo family feel compelled to stand armed guard outside their downtown bakery? The answer lies in the history of two manifestations of that anxiety: neighborhood protectiveness and the anti-Black violence wielded

to achieve it.

A Zero-Sum Game

Italian-American responses to Black Americans, especially in the wake of the Great Migration of Black Southerners to Northern cities, reflected a fundamental principle of social psychology—the “tendency to see social change as a zero-sum outcome in which ‘we are losing.’” Italians and other white immigrant groups broadly saw any potential improvement to Black social status as a potential threat to their own. As Ijeoma Oluo writes, “this promise—*that you will get more because they exist to get less*—is woven throughout our entire society.” This idea, for the Italians of Cleveland, was both symbolic and geographic.

While Little Italy remained Italian throughout the 20th century, other formerly Italian areas in Cleveland became occupied by Black Clevelanders. One major Cleveland Italian neighborhood during the heyday of Italian immigration was known as Big Italy. Within a single generation, Big Italy swung from overwhelmingly Jewish to mostly Italian to increasingly Black. That trend mimicked shifts in many American cities around this time, as immigrant trends transitioned from largely Irish, German, and Jewish immigrants to Southern Europeans, and then to Black Americans following the immigrant restriction laws of the 1920s and the North’s mass labor recruitment from the South. As historian Gene Veronesi notes in [Italian Americans and Their Communities of Cleveland](#), “Italians felt the influx of blacks into [areas like] ‘Big Italy’ to be an encroachment.” The anxiety regarding this encroachment helped grow the seed of anti-Black racism steadily taking root in these Italian communities.

As urban historian [Todd Michney](#) has pointed out, any actual threat to Little Italy’s culture has been Italian flight to the suburbs and “the territorial encroachments of nearby Case Western Reserve University,” not Black Clevelanders moving in. But racist thoughts are rarely rooted in rationality, and Little Italy residents saw Black Clevelanders as the threat. The irrational and racist fear of encroachment illustrates similar territorial anxieties to those the gun-toting Corbo family exhibited while defending their property from Black Lives Matter demonstrators.

Echoes of the Past

Little Italy has always been protective of itself, its residents, and its neighborhood borders—to put it lightly. More than 50 years ago, Little Italy residents responded to Black protesters in a way that feels eerily similar to this May. In the early 1960s, the city of Cleveland responded to overcrowding in Black neighborhood public schools by temporarily bussing Black students to largely white schools. One of these schools was Murray Hill Elementary, the public school located in Little Italy, which was composed almost exclusively of Italian students and much beloved by the neighborhood. The Black students bussed in were segregated in different classrooms, banned from the cafeteria and swimming pool, and allowed to use the toilets only at designated times. A coalition of local Black civil rights groups protested this treatment, gathering in a parking lot near the elementary school on January 30, 1964. They were met there by well over a thousand angry Little Italy residents crowding the streets, blocking access to the school, swearing, shouting, and physically lashing out at the demonstrators, much like the behavior exhibited by residents against the Black Lives Matter teenage protesters this year.



Anti-integration picketers in Cleveland's Little Italy, January 30, 1964. Cleveland Memory Project

Behavior like this was on particularly loud display during the [1966 uprising in Hough](#), a neighborhood just two miles from Little Italy. The seven days of civil disorder were a response to substandard conditions in Hough and ongoing police harassment; they were also a reflection of racial tensions seen nationwide with similar uprisings in cities like [Los Angeles](#), [Newark](#), [Chicago](#), [Baltimore](#), and more from 1965 to 1968. As Black Clevelanders expressed their outrage for a week that July, Italian-Americans in Little Italy set up armed patrols to protect their neighborhood—just as the Corbo family took up arms 54 years later to protect their shop. [Apparently](#), “everybody had heard the colored people were going to come up the hill [to Little Italy] and burn [them] out,” so they had “formed groups to seal off the area for safety...There were hundreds of men organized.” Clearly, the way Little Italy residents respond to Black Clevelanders, especially when they have the “nerve” to demonstrate for their rights and humanity, has not changed much.

The Ladder To Whiteness

In climbing towards whiteness, there had to be something the Italians and other white ethnic groups were fleeing—a thing that some still feel strongly enough about to take up guns outside their storefront and throw objects at teenagers. That thing is Blackness—not only the typical racist fear of Black people, but also the lingering deep-seated anxiety to assert and maintain their own whiteness.

They—and other groups like them, my own Eastern European Jewish ancestors included—climbed the ladder of American history from a non-white lower rung (not the lowest, but not far) and made their way up it, stepping on their Black neighbors for leverage. Understanding this

journey is necessary to understanding that whiteness is both a construct and painfully real. It is a construct because we created it—white people who have it to wield—and it is real because the rewards for those who have it and the punishments for those who don't are raw, violent, and fundamental to the American experience. [James Baldwin once said](#) that when he says “white,” he is “not talking about race,” but rather the construct of whiteness. “White people are imagined,” he says. “White people are white only because they want to be white.”

When the owners of Corbo's defend their property with guns from the Black Lives Matter protesters, and when Little Italy residents hurl insults and bottles at teenagers protesting police brutality, they may not do so with the conscious intent to assert their whiteness. But cultural ideas like anti-Black racism get passed down through communities, especially tight-knit ones like Cleveland's Little Italy. It's in the air they breathe, in part because their ancestors felt the need to claim and then defend their white status. But this, of course, is no excuse for racism—as AI theorist Eliezer Yudkowsky wrote, “you are personally responsible for becoming more ethical than the society you grew up in.” While some of us would not have been considered white a century ago, today we definitively are. With that privilege, we carry the obligation to dismantle the white supremacy in our society and institutions that continues to oppress our Black and brown neighbors in Cleveland and across the country.

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