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Three from the bottom : examining racial and ethnic identity among Italian Americans in Bossier City

Jamie Rene Digilormo

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, jdigil1@lsu.edu

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THREE FROM THE BOTTOM: EXAMINING RACIAL AND ETHNIC
IDENTITY AMONG ITALIAN AMERICANS IN BOSSIER CITY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Anthropology

in

The Department of Geography and Anthropology

by
Jamie Digilormo
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ABSTRACT

This study examines the use of ethnic and racial labels as they are used in the construction of social identity among Italian Americans in Bossier City, Louisiana. In particular, the researcher is interested in how racial and ethnic identities are constructed through linguistic features, such as labels, and how these labels can often reflect the beliefs, values, or ideologies that influence the speaker. By examining which labels are used and how, it is possible to better understand what it means for each participant to be an Italian American today. The researcher relies heavily on Foucault's notion of knowledge/power and the "discursive regimes" that are used as a mechanism for defining social identities in order to provide context for each label.

Race and ethnicity are both rigid and fluid at the same time, affording some the ability to move across these boundaries. Italians in Louisiana, a majority of which immigrated from Sicily, have historically been viewed as non-white, despite their adoption of a white identity today. For this reason, they present a unique case for scholars attempting to understand racial and ethnic affiliation. Yet, few have studied self-identity regarding this often-overlooked north Louisiana community and fewer still have used the linguistic anthropological methods of ethnography and discourse analysis. This study attempts to fill in this gap in the literature. By utilizing linguistic anthropology and the social theories of Foucault, this study provides a unique interdisciplinary insight that contributes to the much-needed research on the Italian American community of north Louisiana.

INTRODUCTION

In the Spring of 1950s Bossier City, Sam Caruso brought his Irish American date, Cici, home to meet his family before heading out for a night on the town. Upon seeing Cici walk through the door Sam's family turned to him and said, "But she's white!" Bewildered, Cici responded, "Well, what are y'all?" The story of the Caruso's first date exposes the complex history of racial identity for Italian Americans in Louisiana. This no doubt awkward situation has, over time, transformed into a lighthearted, humorous family story now that everyone involved unquestionably identifies, and is identified, as white. The story reflects the fluidity of race by highlighting how one group has managed to cross over what are often thought to be rigid, biologically defined racial boundaries in a relatively short period of time. While I very much would like this study to shine a light on the often overlooked Italian American community of Bossier City and their cultural, economic, and political contributions to the state of Louisiana, my main focus will be on how the use of ethnic and racial labels constructs social identity.

Just as racial identity has changed for Italian Americans, their ethnic identity has transformed over time as well. Within a generation or two, descendants of Sicilian immigrants began to identify as Italian or Italian American and continue to do so today. Given the significant historical, cultural and linguistic differences between Sicilians and Italians, the speedy adoption of the label "Italian" and the fact that this evolution often gets glossed over in most narratives is curious to say the least. Examining the use of labels makes it possible to glean insight into how and why social categories are constructed. This study analyzes the labels most frequently used by a sample group of self-identified Italian Americans in order to understand how they view and construct their

own ethnic and racial identities. Because this study depends on the analysis of linguistic features, it fits comfortably within the disciplinary field of Linguistic Anthropology. Additionally, this study draws on Foucault's notion of "Discourse" as "knowledge" in order to understand how this knowledge, and subsequent beliefs or ideology, informs the use of labels and ultimately the construction of social identity.

Several books and articles explore this controversial history of Italians in Louisiana, but few focus on the northern portion of the state. Bossier City provides a vastly different context than most studies on Louisiana's Italian American population for several reasons. Unlike south Louisiana, Bossier Parish has historically maintained a majority white Protestant population. This has resulted in episodes of religious discrimination against Catholics in the area, an issue that is largely absent from the experiences of south Louisiana's Italian communities. Of the small amount of scholarly articles that focus on Italian Americans in northwest Louisiana, the Shreveport community has been the center of attention. While the two communities are certainly related, Shreveport and Bossier represent two very different contexts in which Italians settled. With this study I hope to contribute to the literature on Italian Americans in north Louisiana while also exploring how Discourse or "power/knowledge" constructs racial and ethnic identity.

In the following chapter, I will explain how discourse analysis and the concept of indexicality facilitate this study's goals by providing context for the use of each label. The chapter will also explain Foucault's theory of power/knowledge, which provides insight into the socio-historical "Discourses" that created and defined such labels as "Sicilian", "Italian", and "Italian American", thus facilitating the researcher's

understanding of how these labels reflect ideological views. Chapter three consists of a brief literature review of important racial and ethnic theories that continue to influence social identities. Chapter four explores how racial theories controlled and shaped the identities of Italian immigrants in particular from the period of Italian Unification to the “Second Wave” of immigrants arriving in the late 1800s and early 1900s. This chapter includes a brief history of both Italian and American government policies that were used to subcategorize southern Italians. This chapter ends with a look at Louisiana’s involvement and reaction to this massive immigration, with examples from the state legislature, city newspapers, and laborers’ associations. This chapter will provide examples of the official Discourses that greatly impacted the evolution of racial and ethnic identities.

Chapter five gives an historical overview of the geographic location at hand: Shreveport-Bossier City. These “Twin Cities” have historically been connected both culturally and economically. I wish for this chapter to give the reader a better understanding of how, when, and why Sicilian and Southern Italian immigrants first made the Shreveport-Bossier City area their home. Chapter six contributes the analysis portion of the study, where a variety of labels from interviews and informal gatherings are scrutinized for underlying meanings or ideological beliefs. This section, while utilizing discourse analysis, is informed by the context provided by the previous chapters. Analysis of each example is contextualized by the age or generation, profession, and any other beliefs or ideology, thus making it easier to understand how these attitudes came about. The seventh and final chapter serves as the conclusion to the study, ultimately

finding that people choose the label that was inspired by their personal experiences and the larger discursive regimes that constitute their “knowledge.”

Methods

From May through August of 2011, I divided my time in the Shreveport-Bossier City area between three activities: archival research, participant-observation, and interviews. The archival research was done at LSU of Shreveport’s Noel Memorial Library. With the help of the Special Collections librarians, I went through scholarly articles, Master’s theses, and folders filled with newspaper clippings on the local Italian American community. These sources provided valuable historical information while demonstrating how cherished this community truly is by the people of Shreveport-Bossier. Several librarians, one of which was an Italian descendent from Mississippi, seemed to really enjoy talking with me while sharing all of the information they had to offer on the topic.

Participant observation, a staple of ethnographic research, proved to be near impossible. As Micaela di Leonardo (1984) pointed out in her study on Italian Americans in California, today’s Italian Americans no longer live and work in ethnic neighborhoods; they are integrated into the larger American society. I found few occasions where people gathered for the purpose of celebrating their ethnicity. Though there is still a local branch of the social ethnic club Sons of Italy (which can no longer discriminate against non-Italians as a non-profit organization), they did not meet while I was in town for this project. My father and I attended a conference on Catholicism at Shreveport’s downtown arena in hopes of running into Italian Americans from the area. We walked around, listened to a couple of lectures (given in both Spanish and English), and kept watch out

for people we recognized. Unfortunately, we left without seeing anyone of Italian descent that we knew.

For this reason, the majority of my time was spent with those willing to be interviewed. I conducted interviews with a total of ten people, all but one of which were recorded. Of those ten, half allowed me to interview them more than once. The interviews ranged from half an hour to two hours long depending on the participant. The questions I prepared were open-ended and broadly defined so that the interviewee was able to emphasize what they wanted. I began each interview by explaining that I was interested in ethnic and racial identity, but left it up to them to interpret that however they wanted. In other words, I did not steer their answers so they aligned with my definitions of race or ethnicity. The questions I posed revolved around family biographies, personal biographies, and personal opinions on issues of Italian and American culture. I would wrap up the interview with questions regarding what it meant to them to be “Italian” today.

In order to prompt a more naturally occurring conversation I tried to be as inconspicuous as possible when using recording equipment or taking notes. For this, I used a LiveScribe smart pen that recorded audio while I took notes. Therefore, there was no extra equipment present to make the occasion formal or off-putting. Although they were aware of being recorded, the absence of a visible recording device gave the interview an atmosphere of a relaxed conversation. During the one interview that I was not allowed to record audio I did my best to take notes while emulating a naturally paced conversation.

One problem that I encountered during my attempts at field research, also like di Leonardo, was that many people felt they weren't "real Italians". Many people would insist I get my information from the older generation. Therefore, I found that I needed to convince some participants that they had information that I was interested in and that I wasn't only wanting to speak with people who immigrated. I believe that this feeling of inadequacy towards one's ethnic identity is a byproduct of American assimilation. Since people no longer speak the language or carry out traditions and customs in their daily lives they feel as if they are too far removed from the ethnic identity that they proudly maintain as their own.

All but one of the interviewees were of Sicilian descent and belonged to either the second or third generation of American-born Italians. The only non-Sicilian that I interviewed belonged to a family that originally migrated from Naples (an area that has historically more in common with Sicily than any northern Italian province). All of the participants were middle class, with half having earned college degrees. Of those who lacked higher education, almost all either owned their own business or worked for their family's business. I was introduced to people through friends and family networks and given the patterns of in-group marriage, many participants were related somewhere down the line. Therefore, many "friends" turned out to be distant relatives, even if they no longer identified strongly as such. This largely close-knit community made networking easier, as everyone seemed to know each other. Unfortunately, I wasn't in town long enough to extend my network of participants to include members of other socio-economic backgrounds. It may seem to me like Italian Americans in Bossier City are

doing well for themselves, economically speaking, since that is what I have seen, but that doesn't mean that this is always the case.

Finally, it is important to note that I am a peripheral member of the community of interest, as my Italian American family has always lived in Bossier. Though I have never lived there myself, my family always has and I visit them multiple times a year. Even though many of my participants were meeting me for the first time, they often treated me like family because of their relationship to my relatives. Therefore, the discourse pulled from my interviews, and my interpretation of it, is highly influenced by my own personal relationship to this community, my own desire to identify as Sicilian and the experiences that have shaped my interests in race and ethnicity in general. Those experiences include growing up with Black friends while being exposed to strong expressions of racism throughout Louisiana in general and within the Italian American community specifically. For these reasons, I am writing in a reflexive voice to provide further insight into my analysis of this community's ethnic and racial identities. Although many participants insisted they wouldn't mind if I used their real names, I have changed the names of the participants due to the controversial nature of race and racism. It is not my intention to imply that anyone who has treated me as a friend, taken me into their home and helped me with this project, a racist. I merely intend to point out how institutional racism can influence the identity of every person who lives in its presence, myself included. Finally, for the most part I have chosen to use first names only throughout the text for easier readability even though I used the prefixes "Mr.," "Mrs." and "Ms." during all interactions due to the age gap between the participants and myself.

My Use of Labels Within This Text

For the purposes of this study, I have struggled with my own use of ethnic labels. In order to be as concise and accurate as possible, and because I think the Sicilian identity is important, my own preference is for “Sicilian American”. But this term is far from the most widely used and can even bring about confusion when speaking to those I would call Sicilian American. For example, when I told my grandfather, whose parents were both Sicilian, that I was wanting to interview Sicilian Americans in the area, he questioned my usage of the term and asked, “Why do you keep saying Sicilian?!” Even though he still recalls the names of the Sicilian towns of both his maternal and paternal relatives, he is not accustomed to hearing himself or his friends and family referred to as “Sicilian.” This of course sparked my curiosity, leading me to put the following question to every participant that I engaged in conversation with: “Why do we call ourselves Italian and not Sicilian?” The most common response was some variation of, “I don’t know why, but we’ve just always called ourselves Italian.” For many, this distinction between Sicilian and Italian has completely been erased.

One such example comes from Peter, a third generation Italian American who once described himself in a newspaper article as an “historical Italian”, putting a temporal distance between himself and his ethnicity. Graduating with advanced degrees from two of the state’s top colleges, Peter was serving the area as a well-respected doctor since the 1970s. It wasn’t until fairly recently that Peter learned that for some people, there was a big difference between Italians and Sicilians. “Growing up”, he said, “the distinction did not exist locally.” During a conversation we had in his south Shreveport office, he told me the story of how he first learned of this distinction.

While on a Colorado vacation just a few years back, Peter met a street vendor from New York and as they made small talk they quickly learned that they were both of Italian descent. When Peter stated that he was “full-blooded” Italian (many people, myself included, still draw on the Mendelian pseudo-racial interpretation of ethnicity), the woman confessed that she was only “half”. When he asked her what her other “half” was, to his surprise she replied, “Sicilian.” Peter responded by asking rather bluntly, “Well, aren’t they the same thing?” It was at this point that the woman began to list off what she considered to be significant cultural differences. As he told me this story I could tell he was still fascinated by this concept, probably in part because it was not that long ago that this happened. Peter is not a stranger in Shreveport-Bossier City’s Italian American community. As a well-known doctor, other participants often named Peter as a shining example of the realization of Italian assimilation into American society. In fact, during the early 1980s he was featured in a three-part *Shreveport Journal* article that spanned three generations of Italian Americans, with Peter representing the youngest generation. In the article, he is quoted as saying, “I don’t consider myself to be any different than any other American.”

For these reasons, I feel it is somewhat misleading to use the label “Sicilian” or “Sicilian American” since most of the people I spoke with do not. To make matters even more complicated, many who identify as “Italian American” will often shorten this to simply “Italian” in conversation, as the former is a bit of a mouthful. Since this is text, I will use “Italian American” and “Sicilian American” depending on the context. Though I have often found it frustrating to read authors who use “Italian” and “Sicilian” interchangeably as if they were the same thing, I feel as if I have no other choice but to

do the same. It is not my intention to erase this distinction, in fact quite the opposite. For this reason, I ask that the reader keep all of this in mind while reading the remainder of this study.

Regarding racial labels, the reader may notice the capitalized term “Black” and the lower cased “black” being used at different points throughout the text. Influenced by my education in African American Studies, and in particular by the early writings of Angela Davis, my adoption of the capitalized version has been a politically motivated attempt to empower and show solidarity with the Black community. When I am quoting a participant, I have chosen to use the lower cased version so that I am not conflating my own intentions with the intentions or beliefs of the speaker. I hope that this decision to honor my own values and the values of the participants does not make reading this report more difficult or confusing.

My use of the term “Community”

I realize that the use of the term “community” implies different things to different people. One reason why I use this term is because it’s already been established by local historians, reporters and scholars who have been writing about Italian Americans in the area. As I was introduced to people, I realized that everyone seemed to know everyone else and in many cases were distantly related through marriage. At first, I thought perhaps this could be due to the fact that my main mode of meeting people was through networking, so it was inevitable that people would know each other. Then something happened at the end of the summer, only days after I had left, that reaffirmed my belief that the Italians in Bossier were still a tightknit community regardless of where they now lived.

One Sunday afternoon that August I got a phone call from my step-mother informing me of a tragedy that had just taken place. One of the families that had opened their store and their lives to me had just lost their oldest daughter in a car accident. As if it weren't personal enough, my father, a retired EMT, was the person who pulled her from the wreckage, attempting to save her life. They were both on their way to Christ the King church in a part of the city known as "old Bossier". As I hung up the phone, I couldn't hold back the tears while I sat thinking of the people who had been so kind to me, a stranger who they instantly treated like family. I wanted to leave Baton Rouge immediately and drive the four hours it takes to get there so I could express my condolences in person. Unfortunately, other obligations prevented me from doing so.

My father later told me that there were so many friends of the family at the hospital that they were asked to leave because they were impeding the work of the hospital employees. Dad said that as he stood around in the waiting room with so many others, he spoke with people who asked about me. When he told me that, for the first time I felt like I was in some small way a part of that community of people, these people who have shared a long and unique history together. For me, as well as for these people, they represent a community based on shared experiences rooted in a Sicilian culture.

Disciplinary Contributions

This researcher is attempting to draw from the fields of linguistic anthropology, Italian American studies, and critical race studies. Over the past couple of decades, a growing number of Linguistic Anthropologists have been making significant headway into the developing area of critical race studies currently known as whiteness studies. Scholars like Mary Bucholtz, Sara Trechter, and Jane Hill, each studying the linguistic

characteristics of white identity and racism, remain an inspiration for new generations of anthropologists like myself. Scholars such as David Roediger and James Barrett, both attempting to uncover what this thing we call “whiteness” really is and how it works, were a major inspiration for this study. Italian American scholars such as Michaela di Leonardo and Nancy Carnevale , as well as other critical scholars of Louisiana’s Italian American communities such as John Baiamonte, Jr. and Kathryn Barattini, all proved to me that I was capable of taking what some would call the approach of “native anthropology” by writing about my own ethnic heritage, even if it meant being critical at times.

THEORY

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis (DA) was originally applied to the disciplinary field of linguistics as a tool for analyzing grammatical components of discourse (speech or text). It wasn't until the late 1960s that DA was incorporated into the social sciences and humanities, turning the focus more towards discourse as "a level or component of language use, related to but distinct from grammar" (Sherzer 1987:296). In more recent years, discourse has come to be viewed as social action that reveals patterns of belief via patterns of speech. Discourse analysis can uncover the ways in which these intrinsic beliefs, judgments, and values are produced, reproduced, challenged, or deconstructed by the speaker. Therefore, language use can reflect the speaker's vision of the world or ideological views. Labels represent one such linguistic feature that can reveal beliefs, values, and ideologies.

Labels represent a type of linguistic form that expresses identity both explicitly and in a "mediated fashion" known as *indexicality* (Bucholtz 2001:9). Therefore, labels not only explicitly communicate identity, but they also hold implicit meanings that index the ideological beliefs or values these labels draw on. Linguistic anthropologist Michael Silverstein (1976) is widely credited with being one of the first scholars to use the term *indexicality* to represent this connection between identity and ideology. Indexicality occurs when speech references or points to something other than the explicit thing itself, similar to an icon or symbol. Labels allow individuals to index various aspects of their social identity without being explicit. I will be relying heavily on the concept of indexicality in my analysis of the labels used by members of this Italian American

community. Of the several scholars who have written extensively on the history of this group, few have explored the ways in which ideology and ethnic identity are constructed and conveyed through language.

In Louisiana, historians and scholars have often interviewed older Italian Americans in order to preserve their knowledge and their memories of a way of life believed to have passed, but few social scholars have used discourse analysis as a method for documenting discursively constructed social identities. The one exception I've found that utilizes language as a means of understanding ethnic identity is Kathryn Barattini's study on the use of ethnic phrases or words and how they function to preserve ethnic self-identity. In Barattini's study of the Sicilian American community of the Shreveport-Bossier City area, the author surveys the use of ethnic words or phrases and finds their use to be a significant component of ethnic self-identity (2000: 3). My research follows in Barattini's academic footsteps by trying to understand how Italian Americans in Bossier City construct ethnic identity through language. In contrast to Barattini's quantitative study, my use of interviews as a qualitative approach to discourse analysis focuses on the use of racial labels as well as ethnic labels. Whereas she concentrated on the use of foreign words or phrases, I am solely analyzing the use of labels within a specified context.

Foucault, Discourse, and Identity

As previously stated, the term "discourse" in linguistic anthropology refers to speech, text, or communication of any kind. Conversely, Foucault (1976) used the term "discourse" to identify the official production of "knowledge" by institutions like the state and academia. For Foucault, it's official organizations like these that are so crucial

to the construction of individuals and their subsequent social identities. Norman Fairclough's book, *Language and Power*, was one of the first to incorporate Foucault's notion of "orders of discourse" into traditional discourse analysis by emphasizing the ideological underpinnings of discourses, which he defines as "common-sense assumptions of which people are generally not consciously aware" (1989:2). Fairclough, like Foucault, views institutional power as having the capacity to create orders of discourse that reflect specific ideologies; ideologies that, in turn, are adopted by society at large. For Fairclough, "ideologies are closely linked to language, because using language is the commonest form of social behavior and the form of social behavior where we rely on 'common-sense' assumptions" (1989:2). These largely adopted ideologies or common sense ways of thinking and speaking establish and strengthen solidarity among members of a particular social grouping. In order to differentiate between the definition of "discourse" found in traditional DA and the Foucaultian definition of "Discourse," I will use capitalization to indicate the latter. Discourse delivered by what Foucault calls "discursive regimes" factors into the construction of identity via the production of knowledge, allowing the governing powers to manufacture and manipulate the Discourse that these social identities draw upon. Foucault called this form of governmental rule "biopower."

Biopower represented a turning point in how social theorists understood how power works in modern societies. Unlike the juridical model of power, Foucault theorized power as a productive, positive and multifaceted force that "doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says 'no', but [...] it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms of knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be thought of as a

productive network which runs through the whole social body” (Foucault 1980: 119). The production of official discourse allows power to create what is considered “truth” and “knowledge”. Foucault defines discourse as an official claim to truth made by persons of a certain authority or rank, such as a doctor or social scientist. As such, reproducing said discourse is an exercise of power by using the “forms of knowledge” that power creates. Discursive regimes are systems designed for the dispersion of discourse or knowledge. Foucault insists that power and knowledge are inseparable from one another, with knowledge constituting a technique of power used in a modern society to discipline and regulate the population. This becomes achievable through the creation of the individual.

Foucault’s genealogy of the human sciences’ discursive regimes goes all the way back to the Middle Ages and the practice of confession. The confession becomes an integral part of the production of knowledge by the 18th century, when there is a shift from a focus on the confession of a crime or sexual act to the confession of the passions, desires, and nature of the criminal or sexual “deviant”. The act itself begins to define the nature or essence of the individual. Foucault claims, “a ‘positive’ knowledge of the delinquents and their species [...] is gradually established” (Foucault 1977: 254). As a result, the disciplines of psychology, sociology, natural history and anthropology were established to produce knowledge via discourse. In this way, “bodies of knowledge- modern social sciences- are inextricably interwoven with techniques of social control; their very constitution as knowledge depends on mechanisms of power” (Gutting 1989: 6).

The works of Michel Foucault (1977, 1978) explore the relationship between power and knowledge in part by examining the creation of the individual, or “individualization”. Foucault posits that the individual was created through a system of three disciplinary elements that can be found in various institutions of a modern society: hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and examination. The first refers to a system of hierarchically ranked individuals, each reporting their observations to the person immediately above them. These observations are then compiled and judged by their content in order to deduce a “normality” or normalized behavior that is deemed by the state to be appropriate behavior for all of society. The second element, normalizing judgment, is the mechanism by which power defines what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior, what is normal and abnormal. Through the qualitative and quantitative research of the social sciences, a norm is established via the production of scientific knowledge and becomes adopted by the population. Foucault states that, “the regime of disciplinary power [...] is meant to normalize, bring into play the binary opposition of the permitted and the forbidden” (Foucault 1977:182). Since the norm is being cultivated by the state, it certainly follows that the norm will serve the needs of the state. Ultimately, the state’s goal is to rehabilitate individuals determined to be deviants into productive members of society.

The third element of discipline in modern society is the examination, which Foucault maintains is both the “deployment of force and the establishment of truth” (Foucault 1977: 184). The examination combines the first two elements by extracting information and situating an individual within the corpus of knowledge, revealing the individual’s “truth”. Foucault maintains that the examination is the heart of the technique

that maintains the individual as both object and the result of power/knowledge. Through the creation of the individual as object, the placement of the population into neat groups or categories becomes possible. Foucault insists we are now so far removed from the origins of these mechanisms of power that we no longer as a society view being placed into the state's categories as unnatural or an exercise of power. We have begun to view ourselves as naturally falling into such state sanctioned categories as heterosexual, homosexual, black, white, psychological deviant, etc.

In this new form of governing, Foucault argues, "What was formed was a political ordering of life, not through an enslavement of others, but through an affirmation of self." Power perpetuates itself not through forceful oppression, but through the discourses and knowledge that inform subjectivities and control the behavior of the population. According to Foucault, "we are internally constituted in power [...] We make investments in ourselves in order to get returns. This is how power constitutes our subjectivity" (Foucault 1976:69). Foucault focuses on sexuality as an example of subjectivity that was created through discursive regimes, though race and ethnicity can likewise be viewed as an example of power touching the individual. Therefore, it is pertinent to this study that the dominant discursive regimes be considered in order to contextualize the formation and evolution of Italian American subjectivity. In order to understand how race and ethnicity are constructed, we must first understand how they have been created via Discourse. The following chapter provides a brief historical overview of the theories of race and ethnicity that remain influential for the participants of this study.

ITALIANS, ETHNICITY AND RACE: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Race and Ethnicity

At different points throughout human history, race as a category has been defined by religious, national, or biological affiliation. Not until the Age of Reason beginning in the 17th century did race become predominantly grounded in a Discourse of biology. “The shift from medieval pre-modernity to modernity is in part the shift from a religiously defined to a racially defined discourse on human identity and personhood” (Goldberg 1993: 24). Still, as any review of the scientific literature will show, these discourses on race maintained close ties to culture and cognitive aptitude. Inspired by Darwinian theory, links between biology and culture led to the social evolutionary view of humanity needed to justify the colonization, exploitation and enslavement of non-Europeans due to their lack of “true reason” (Goldberg 1993: 23). Still, the added biological element of race has made racism as we know it today possible.

While race may no longer be used solely as a biological synonym for subspecies, it remains a prominent feature of U.S. society. Voluminous and varied, the wide ranging discourse on race demonstrates the complexity and difficulty of pinpointing exactly what it signifies, not only as a marker of identity but also as a “location in a social system and its consequences” (Guglielmo 2003:31). For most race scholars today, race is a “fluid, transforming, historically specific concept parasitic on theoretic and social discourses for the meaning it assumes at any historical moment” (Goldberg 1993: 74). In light of this definition, it becomes easy to see commonalities between “race” and “ethnicity”. Where ethnicity was once viewed as having a primordial, biological definition, it is now seen as being socially constructed as well.

Up until the 20th century, discourse on ethnicity invoked a similar meaning to race, blurring the lines between physical and cultural, which resulted in “a legacy similar to that for ‘race,’ in part because the terms have often been used as synonyms” (Outlaw 1996: 170). American discourse on ethnicity began to gain traction around the time of two major events in American history: one being the dismantling of the physical basis for race by the scientific community and the second being the national integration of millions of European immigrants into American society. Discourse on ethnicity in America at the turn of the century reveals a desire to shift from a biological determinism to a cultural determinism, while at the same time assisting Americans in navigating these new cultural identities that were becoming more and more visible in their communities.

Foucault pinpoints the first government census, a technique for extracting information regarding the behavior of the population, around the 18th century. This historical event marks the first time that sex became a police matter and the creation/categorization of race an interest of the state (Bernasconi 2010: 212). European scholars within the field of Natural History produced Discourse that ranked humanity along a racial hierarchy based on the classical aesthetics and cultural norms of ancient Greece (West 1982: 57). In addition to many others, Cornell West locates the origins of America’s ideology of race firmly within this discursive regime, one that he claims, “secretly white supremacy” (1982: 48). As the theory of European/white genetic superiority crossed the Atlantic, both Europe and the US were gripped by this new concept of humanity that valued European/white lives over non-European/Black lives. Therefore, by the time thousands of southern Italians and Sicilians were migrating to the US, the concept of a racial hierarchy was already firmly imbedded in both countries.

To use the term “European” here is a bit misleading due to the fact that southern Italy and Sicily are technically a part of Europe, yet have historically been treated as belonging to a separate “race” and culture. Prior to the Unification in 1870, most of what is now known as Italy was segregated provinces with vastly differing languages, cultures, and customs. The South, known collectively as the *Mezzogiorno*, has been genetically linked to the Middle East and North Africa while the North was associated with German, Austrian and Swedish provinces. These geographic and cultural differences have been used by distinguished academics and politicians as evidence that the *Mezzogiorno* is inhabited by a different, inferior “race” of people and therefore issues such as poverty and underdevelopment that have plagued the region for centuries should be traced back to this fact. As a result of this trend of northern exploitation and southern underdevelopment, many southern Italians fled their hometowns for the Americas in search of the type of opportunities that their newly founded country could not provide. While they unquestionably found those opportunities, the racialized stigma of the *Mezzogiorno* followed them across the Atlantic and remained a major issue for decades.

From as far back as the Medieval era, prominent Italian intellectuals have described southern Italy as “a paradise inhabited by devils” (D’Agostino 2002: 319). In 1901, Cesare Lombroso, founder of criminal anthropology, argued that criminality was socio-biological, pathological, and stemmed from an inferior evolutionary genome found in the southern Italian “race.” Linking genetics with the founding of criminal organizations, anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi argued in 1895’s *The Mediterranean Race* that it was their African genome causing a “savage tendency that culminates in violent crimes and criminal associations such as the mafia or camorra” (D’Agostino 2002:326).

Consequently, this Italian Discourse of southern racial inferiority influenced the founders of American criminology, shaping U.S. immigration laws at a time when thousands of southern Italians and Sicilians were migrating to the United States.

In many cases, these same racist Italian anthropologists became collaborators with the U.S. Commissioner-General of Immigration in order to put a stop to further immigration from southern Italy as government officials questioned the Sicilians' and southern Italians' racial status and subsequent capacity for citizenship (D'Agostino 2002:328). The resulting Dillingham Report distinguished between Italians with the labels "old immigrant" (read: northern Italian) and "new immigrant" (read: southern Italian). The "old immigrant" designated the first wave of Italian migrants who were often explorers, statesmen, and artists from northern Italy. The "new immigrant" represented the Second Wave of immigrants who fled their country after Unification. These were primarily southern Italian and Sicilian landless peasants. The Bureau of Immigration divided Italians into these two groups and, based on work by Lombroso and Sergi, determined that southern Italians were substantially dissimilar in language, physique, and character (D'Agostino 2002: 330). "American liberals, socialists, and conservatives used [the Italian School of Anthropology's] racial hierarchy to distinguish between 'old' and 'new' immigrants from the Mezzogiorno," resulting in the immigration restriction laws of 1921 and 1924 (D'Agostino 2002: 320). This racialized distinction made "new immigrants" an ambiguous category not easily transposed into the American binary system of race, a system that had been in place for over a century at the time of mass immigration.

The first census on race in the U.S. took place in 1790. At the country's inception, the impetus for most Discourse on race involved the justification of the dehumanizing economic system of racial slavery founded on the ideology of white supremacy that stretched across the first two centuries of American history. Biblical and scientific Discourses justifying a slavery based on race were published and disseminated to the population regularly. After the (perhaps nominal) abolition of slavery at the end of the Civil War, race became more important than ever for whites in the US due now that Black people were equal in the eyes of the Constitution. Therefore, in an effort to defend racist ideologies, "scientific obsession with racial differences took hold just as abolitionists were scoring their greatest successes" (Jackson and Weidman 2006:34). New racist discourses were born out of the cultural backlash that resulted from this era of Reconstruction.

As scientists' understanding of genes improved, the discourse on race evolved to incorporate Mendellian law. Prior to this discovery, racial categories ranged from four to over one hundred based on various combinations of physical attributes. In 1910, the theory of hereditary recessive genes exposed the permanency of genes, prompting American legal discourse into "circumscribing Whiteness in terms of the one-drop rule". (Bernasconi 2010: 214). Science wasn't the only discursive regime to set about condemning "race mixing". Inter-racial relationships were seen as an abomination to God and his followers. "Race mixing" also interfered with the system of social stratification that was largely maintained through sight (Bernasconi 2010: 210). As a result, during the 1864 re-election campaign of President Lincoln a democratic pamphlet popularized the word 'miscegenation' within the national lexicon (Smith 2006:38). Discourse promoting

racial purity lent legitimacy to the segregated institutions that lingered throughout the country up until the not-so-distant past.

For social scientists and physicians like Josiah Nott, the health of American society depended on the purity of the white racial stock. Critical race scholar Theodore Allen (1994) views the United States Constitution's classification of Europeans as "migrants" and Africans as "imports" as further proof of the government's desire to control society's "racial hygiene." At the end of the 19th century, the Dillingham Commission's *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* defined the country's thirty-six racial categories, "raising the specter of white Europeans introducing an invisible single drop of black blood into the American nation" (Gabaccia 2003:56).

In an effort to address growing concerns regarding the racial make-up of the nation, immigration policies and assimilation programs were designed and enforced as a way of ensuring a white majority. For many migrating to the U.S., the black/white binary standard was unfamiliar and difficult to adjust to. Nonetheless, "this privilege of immigration carried with it a status entirely new to the newcomers; the moment they set foot on United States soil, however lowly their social status might otherwise be they were endowed with all the immunities, rights and privileges of "American whites" (Allen 1994:185). The fact that many immigrants were labeled white while simultaneously suffering racial discrimination suggests a hierarchy of both "race" and "color" operating within American culture (Guglielmo 2003:36).

One of the earliest reports to examine racism and Italian Americans was written by psychologists interested in the emotional effects of white racism on the personality. A 1938 quantitative report on Italian immigrants documented the effects of racial prejudice

on Italian Americans by administering surveys in an effort to understand each generation's attitudes regarding "race prejudice" (Kingsley and Carbone 1938:532). Focusing on "racial attitudes of foreign born and American born Italians as a result of contact with Americans", the findings, as one could imagine, linked feelings of humiliation with the experience of discrimination. Interestingly, low socio-economic status, rather than racial status, was given by those surveyed as the main cause of their experiences of discrimination. The authors claimed that even though the older generations had more experience with racism than their younger counterparts, they found that participants of all ages exhibited signs of internalized racism (1938: 535).

After WWII a growing number of biologists and physicians were beginning to question the previous scientific Discourse that described race as a biological reality. But by this point, it was difficult to deny that the legacy of race had permeated the ideological and cultural fabric of U.S. society. Despite the efforts of social scientists arguing otherwise, racism remained a prominent component of large portions of American society. As late as 1956, in an address to the States' Rights Council of Georgia, Representative James C. David claimed that integrated schools revealed, "well-known differences between whites and blacks which no amount of glossing over and covering up by subversive so-called anthropologists can hide" (Smith 2006:108).

In addition to taking on an unfamiliar racial identity, Southern Italians found themselves faced with a new ethnic identity as well. For most Americans, the provincial identities of the "second wave" of immigrants were unfamiliar and therefore meaningless, so instead they began associating the immigrants with a pan-ethnic nationality or "ethnonationality" that ignored any differences that may have existed in the Old World

(Conzen 1992:11). Therefore, “the invention of ethnicity as a status category within American society occurred in a complex dialogue between American imposition of ethnic categories and immigrant rallying of ethnic identities” (Conzen 1992:8). These ethnic identities were largely created by an American Discourse designed to “defuse the hostility of the mainstream ethnoculture by depicting the compatibility of the sidestream culture” with American principles and ideals (Conzen 1992: 5).

After this wave of immigration tapered off, American social scientists theorized about the ways in which American society affects ethnic identity. Two competing theories emerged, each attempting to explain how these ethnic groups responded to their new environment. The first theory was known as the Melting Pot or Assimilationist theory. It stated that ethnic identities would eventually conform to Anglo-American culture, leaving their ethnicity behind (Alba 1990: 1). Assimilation remained “the dominant interpretation both in American historiography and nationalist ideology” (Alba 1990:3). Anti-immigration laws, a rise in intermarriage, and the assimilation policies of American institutions all contributed to the dilution of ethnic identities for many first- and second- generation Italians born in America.

The second theory, Multiculturalism, stated that the numerous ethnicities would continue to thrive due to social patterns relating to residence, religious practices and the unifying effects of American racism and xenophobia. Anthropologist Clifford Geertz saw ethnicity as a primordial instinct, able to withstand the pressures of the dominant culture. The ethnic movement of the sixties, in part inspired by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements, emphasized ethnic resilience in the face of the Melting Pot theory. This movement represented an “unexpected persistence and vitality of ethnicity as a source of

group identity and solidarity” (Conzen 1992: 4). Michael Novak’s book *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*, a book that documented the ethnic movements following the 1960s, argued that white Americans and white ethnics were two different things, the former of which was cultivated in a culture of racism while the latter was only recently introduced to the black/white dichotomy of American society (Nagel 1994: 88). Ethnic revivals can be viewed as a way for white ethnics to challenge the notion that they have assimilated into mainstream American culture.

Another important theory was proposed in Herbert Gans’ book on “symbolic ethnicity”, which attempted to further explain the ethnic identities of the offspring of immigrants participating in this ethnic revival. According to Gans, the first and second generation Americans assimilated into American culture; it wasn’t until the third generation of Americans, who realized what significant portions of their ethnic heritage had been lost, that a “symbolic” ethnic identity was created. Gans asserts that this type of ethnic identity is voluntary and often used only at certain times and for activities that require little investment (as opposed to, say, learning a language). Gans doesn’t view ethnic reclamation as conflicting with patterns of assimilation due to the adoption of “easy and intermittent ways of expressing their identity” that don’t conflict with other ways of life (Nagel 1994:9).

It appears as if Gans was right about younger generations and their desire to reconnect with a seemingly lost ethnic identity. The 1980s cultural revival saw a great influx of ethnic heritage tourism, museums, and other ethnic organizations that serve as an educational resource. Today various social scholars look to ethnicity as a “reconstruction” of history and culture that also allows for the construction of a new

identity (Nagel 1994:162). Others continue to point to the “messiness” concerning ethnicity’s relationship to race, as ethnicity can be viewed as mainly a privilege of the white community. Outlaw (1996) has suggested that the embracing of an ethnic identity is itself an American tradition and is therefore assimilationist in nature.

The association to race is why some scholars have used terms such as “ethnoracial” or “racialized ethnicity” which point to the interconnectedness of the two concepts throughout this country’s history. Even though ethnicity has been an important aspect of American identity for some time now, for Gabrielle Modan the fact remains that the foundation of American “ethnoracial categories is a ‘white-black’ binary” (1998:18). Race is such a powerful social status marker that “U.S. society makes internal differences unimportant in comparison to black/white boundary” (Nagel 1994: 56). This is made evident in the fact that ethnicity rarely comes up in both popular and scholarly discourse regarding African Americans. While whites have considerable latitude in choosing ethnic identities, Americans of African descent have but one option regarding social identity: Black (Nagel 1994: 56). Regardless of the fact that early immigrants from southern Italy experienced a form of race-based discrimination, their progeny has been afforded a social mobility, as far as ethnic and racial identity is concerned, primarily reserved for whites.

Italian Americans and Race

After the initial psychology report on Italian Americans and racism, the literature doesn’t pick back up until the late 60s, a time when ethnicity in America was becoming more important than it had ever been before. It wasn’t until the Civil Rights campaigns that groups who had learned to suppress their ethnic identities in their new American environments decided to reclaim their lost heritage. In 1969 the Italian ethnic

organization, the American Italian Heritage Association, was created as a result and set out to raise support for Italian American scholarship and academic discourse. Many of the subsequent academic studies were in part focused on Louisiana's Italian communities, specifically regarding race relations and the effects of southern white racism.

As early as 1965, scholars were analyzing the ways in which "Italians learned they had better adopt the customs, prejudices, and way of life of Louisiana's whites" (Cunningham 1965:36). In George Cunningham's article *The Italian: A Hindrance to White Solidarity in Louisiana*, an article often cited by scholars of Italian America's tumultuous racial history, suggests that the majority Sicilian population in Louisiana had strong incentive to adopt white racism from the moment they arrived in the country. Even though they were considered legally white, Cunningham points to the lynchings of Sicilians during a political movement that was meant to unify white voters as evidence of the racial ambiguity of Sicilian immigrants. Ultimately, the author attributes this wave of mob violence to the proximity to the Black community. He even goes so far as to say that many Sicilians assumed the status of African Americans and that "one blended into the other, and Southern thinking made no effort to distinguish between them" (1965: 25).

Robert Orsi's 1992 article on converging ethnicities follows the progression from Sicilian/southern Italian to white American, which he traces back to racial discrimination both in Italy and America. He notes that "the arrival of this new brown population coincided with the tightening of Jim Crow legislation", resulting in what he calls a racial "in-betweenness" (1992: 3). This racial ambiguity caused communities in Mississippi to campaign against Italian children attending white schools (Orsi 1992: 3). Additionally, southern Italians were forced to sit in the back of catholic churches with Black

congregants. Orsi claims that the adoption of white racism by Italian Americans was in large part an economic investment. Likewise, David Roediger (1995) states that choosing whiteness and regarding whiteness as important was something Louisiana's Italian Americans eventually did for political reasons (not wanting to be powerless and lack civil rights). With that said, the author suggests that choosing whiteness wasn't a universal decision and points to New Orleans jazz singer Louis Prima as an example of this. John Gennari's article *Passing for Italian* stresses that as Italian Americans gained mobility in white America, they also gained a sense of racial superiority.

James R. Barrett and David Roediger explain how "becoming white" and "becoming American" were "intertwined at every turn" (1997: 6). Due to this new wave of immigration, whiteness became synonymous with being "fit for citizenship." They call immigration reform a "triumph of racism against new immigrants" (Barrett and Roediger 1997: 20). Discursive regimes supporting Progressive Era assimilation politics and Americanization curricula, as well as the fact that white identity was tied to wage labor and political citizenship, heavily influenced the adoption of this privileged social ranking. The authors argue that immigrants underwent racial categorization in conjunction with the development of an ethnic identity.

Nancy Carnevale (2003) examines other mechanisms that "delimit the construction and expression of ethnic identity" among Italian Americans during World War II. Carnevale chronicles the social and cultural responses to America's entry into a war against Italy that played a major role in shaping how Italian ethnic identity was expressed. Suspicions of Italian language newspapers and radio stations were more than enough for such government agencies as the FBI to consider them threats to national

security and effectively ban the Italian language from American society (2003: 2).

Italians were no longer able to identify with their own language in public spheres, further contributing to the decline in numbers among native speakers. Indeed, within my own study of Italian Americans, only the oldest generations can remember phrases or words from their grandparents' original Sicilian dialect.

Another area of American society that has played a large role in the process of "Americanization" for Italian immigrants is that of sports. For earlier generations, sports organizations remained largely segregated, forcing Italian Americans to play for the Catholic leagues. Those leagues served as a "powerful symbol of ethnic group identity" (Mormino 1982:5). Paradoxically, it both retarded assimilation and promoted Americanization. Within the American Italian museum of New Orleans there is a "Sports Hall of Fame", which is literally a hallway lined with framed pictures of Italian American athletes. Likewise, I found that many participants from Bossier City reminisced about the days of their youth spent playing sports and some even outwardly stated that this was an avenue for them to become accepted into the white community.

The 1980s ethnic revival brought with it Italian American scholars who were influenced by a number of other racial and ethnic movements attempting to take back the academic Discourse by writing from their own experiences. Michaela di Leonardo's ethnographic study of Italian American ethnic identity in California was written during this period. Demonstrating the influence of the Black Power movement, the author calls for an increase in Italian American scholars, claiming that many scholars up until this point were whites who described Italian Americans in derogatory terms, producing results "similar to much white-produced academic literature on Blacks" (1984: 173). Her

research locates various sources of ethnic identity for Italian Americans across multiple generations and socio-economic backgrounds. Though racism was for the most part absent from the experiences of these communities, di Leonardo noted the cross-burning that took place on Catholic lawns in the Midwest, confirming once more that Italian American identity has historically stood apart from white America, including outside of the American South. For this reason, she suggests researching “the ways in which they (Italians) define themselves vis-à-vis other ethnic and racial groups, and vis-à-vis the majority white community” (1984: 158). Among others, this study will address some of di Leonardo’s concerns, even if in a limited manner.

The issue of Italian Americans and race became so widespread during this time that the ethnic organization known as the American Italian Historical Association published *Shades of Black and White*, specifically to discuss issues surrounding their racial identity, while paying close attention to the relationship between the Italian and African American communities. For many scholars within this text, Italian American identity was imposed by outside forces and forged “in the clash between ideological Titans: racism and individualism” (Kirschenbaum 1999: 101). Even though the organization was attempting to critique the relations between Italian and African Americans, the latter’s perspectives are curiously missing from this publication.

Though more publications have focused on the racial identity of Italian immigrants and their Italian American progeny, none have a title that so quickly and bluntly addresses the issue as Jennifer Guglielmo’s and Salvatore Salerno’s *Are Italians White? : How Race Is Made In America*. This collection of essays explores Italians and race through an array of topics, ranging from recent episodes of racial violence to the

cinematic portrayals of such episodes. Kym Ragusa's memoir *Fuori/Outside* highlights the difficulties of walking the racial line between Italian and African American for those of mixed descent. The book also includes an autobiographical essay written by Edvige Giunta, which captures her own experiences of "passing" for Italian, even though she isn't of mixed race but a Sicilian living in northern Italy who "grew up at a time in which the pressure toward cultural homogenization - enacted through the privileging of Italian language and culture over Sicilian culture [...] - was particularly strong" (2003: 227). Similar assessments have come out of analyzing the Sicilian experience in America. In addition to the adoption of an Anglo-American identity, Jerome Krase (1999) demonstrates how southern Italians had to adopt a "high Italian culture" emblematic of northern Italy in order to be accepted in American culture.

More recently, Thomas J. Ferraro (2005) has called American society "post-ethnic" and states that one can "feel Italian" without being of Italian descent. Understanding it as 'ethnicity-in-transit', Ferraro moves beyond the "us vs. them" dichotomy inherent in the concept of the "white ethnic" and towards a theory of constant and mutual cross-cultural exchange by arguing that Italians are becoming more American while Americans are becoming more Italian. Like Carnevale, Ferraro points out the persistence of Italian American culture over the past decades despite the mechanisms of assimilation, even if the resulting product has been a "mass-mediated Italian American lite" (2005: 5). Ferraro argues against the idea that Italian Americans are now simply white Americans, stating that, "The vanguard of the Anglo- academy now asks, anxiously, have the Italians become white? And this book responds provocatively, no, that's not it. The Americans get (to feel) more Italian." (Ferraro 2005:204). Unlike

Carnevale, Ferraro frames the cross-cultural exchange between Italian immigrants and Americans as “cultural reciprocity” rather than in terms of a dominant culture and sub-culture.

The idea of a “mass-mediated Italian American lite” identity rings true for many Italian Americans today. Another term that I came across in my research at LSU expressed a similar sentiment: “counterfeit Italian.” The expression “counterfeit Italian” came up in various local Shreveport journal articles from the 1980s. At this point in time, Shreveport had a thriving Italian Festa, a celebration of the local Italian American community that included traditional drinks, food and festivities. One author proclaimed that he was one of these “counterfeit Italians” who was Italian in name only. The article ended by exclaiming that during the Festa, *anyone* can claim an Italian identity and come enjoy Italian culture as if it were their own.

The aforementioned works on Italian American identity have contributed to a greater understanding of how various elements of society can influence the evolution of race and ethnicity for immigrant groups. It is my hope that this work follows in their footsteps in an effort to further uncover the issues of ethnic and racial identity regarding Italian Americans, the effects of racism on ethnic identity, and the appropriation of high Italian culture by southern Italians and Sicilians over the years.

Southern Italians in Louisiana

The following pages will give a brief overview of the discriminatory practices and acts of white racism that southern Italians once faced in the state of Louisiana in order to better understand some of the events that inspired the development of their new racial and ethnic identities. While this is not an exhaustive list of incidents by any means, this short

review offers the more well-known occurrences of violence that affected many immigrants across the state. These incidences were not isolated, but rather influenced by the zeitgeist of the early 20th century American South.

By 1890, the year Louisiana passed the “separate but equal” statute upheld by *Plessy v. Ferguson*, mass immigration from southern Italy was well underway. Southern Italians quickly became the largest immigrant group in the city of New Orleans and eventually the entire state of Louisiana (Botein 1979: 262). Sicilians, who easily represented the majority of the southern Italian immigrants, were mostly doing agricultural work in the sugar cane or cotton fields, and living in the poorer parts of town, where they came into direct contact with the African American community. In addition to the commonality of residence and employment, Sicilians worshipped with Black Catholics, cementing a link between the two communities in the minds of many Louisianians. This intimate relationship was reflected in the fact that many Black southerners made “unabashed distinctions between Dagoes and white folks, treating the former with a friendly, first-name familiarity” (Barrett and Roediger 1997:30). As a result of this friendliness, the practice of lynching was extended to Sicilians as well, the most infamous of which followed the murder of a New Orleans lawman.

In 1891 eleven Sicilians were lynched by a mob of thousands of New Orleanians responding to the murder of Police Chief Hennessey. The victims were acquitted in a trial where they were accused of being responsible for the death of Chief Hennessey. The murder took place in the French Quarter yet somehow there were no witnesses. However, police were able to reach the chief before he died and when they asked him who fired the shots that would take his life he supposedly responded “the dagoes” (Botein 1979:264).

Within 24 hours of the Chief's utterance, 45 Sicilians were arrested and 11 were brought to trial. When the judge ordered a mistrial and declared that the accused were free to go, the citizens decided to take justice into its own hands. The following morning thousands rushed towards the prison, where they found the Sicilians and lynched them outside of the prison house. The list of newspapers praising the city's brutality was a long one (Botein 1979: 267). Many citizens believed in the existence of an organized criminal network and agreed that the Mafia had bribed jurors. The criminal image of the Sicilian became the immigrant community's cross to bear and anti-Italian sentiment continued to grow. As a result, "even the very word 'Sicilian' evoked visions of hot-headed Mafiosi" (Botein 1979: 279).

Disenfranchisement was another tool used against Sicilians and African Americans alike in an effort to limit their power as citizens. In 1898, the Louisiana state constitutional convention provided a platform for delegates to concede that "Italians' skin happens to be white, but when it comes to white man's government, they're as black as the darkest negro" (Cosco 2003:16). The same year that the U.S. began to record northern and southern Italians separately for their immigration statistics, five Sicilian men were lynched for violating protocols of racial interaction in Haynesville, Louisiana (Cosco 2003:11).

Siragusa Shanabruch (1977) chronicled Louisiana's attempts at luring immigrants in order to boost the state's economy. This was accomplished in part through the building of railroads and the selling of cheap land. Shanabruch demonstrates how recruiters of immigrant workers were also politically motivated to increase the white population in

Louisiana, which assumed a racial majority for the first time over the course of mass immigration in the 1890s (1977: 224).

Leading Italian American scholar John V. Baiamonte, Jr. (1992) delves into the history of one of the biggest public lynchings in Italian American history where he describes the all-white Committee of Fifty, assigned to investigate the Italian mafia, as a “continuum of Reconstruction Era White League” (1992: 124). Baiamonte also wrote about the lynchings in Tangipahoa, a parish he describes as “mostly white, klan country” (1986: 1). The “Italian Six” were hanged in Tangipahoa for the murder of one man, of which the New Orleans Times Picayune wrote, “never in the history of LA or the US have six men been hanged for one offense” (Baiamonte 1986: 103). Baiamonte emphasizes the importance of the use of anti-Italian sentiment and mafia rumors to garner support for these murders. He also describes several other lynchings that occurred throughout Louisiana, including Shreveport. In 1911 the state’s governor called Sicilians “just a little worse than the Negro, being if anything filthier in [their] habits, lawless, and treacherous” (Baiamonte 1986: 63).

Even the most popular book on the Italians of Louisiana, written by A.V. Margavio and Jerome J. Salomone points to the Hahnsville, Tallulah and Amite lynchings for evidence of racial hostility. Like many other scholars, they claim there was a “noticeable absence of racism” among Italians (2002: 202). Clive Webb’s study *The Lynching of Sicilian Immigrants in the American South, 1886-1910* calls this a “neglected” subject and claims “with the exception of Mexicans in Texas, no other minority suffered in larger numbers from the hands of lynch mobs” (2002:45). Webb discusses Nativism as a response to immigration and compares the popular image of

Sicilians as violent murderers to the construction of Black men as rapists, each meant to justify the lynchings and bodily mutilation that often followed. As late as 1922, an Alabama Court of Appeals announced that a Sicilian woman was not white and acquitted a Black man who was tried for miscegenation (Webb 2002: 70).

The history of Italians has been explored in various scholars' works, both at the local and national level, so that even fictional works have ample literature to draw on when reconstructing the racial realities of the Sicilian experience in Louisiana. In Joseph L. Cacibauda's work of historical fiction the issue of race is ever-present. *After Laughing Comes Crying (Prima Arridi E Poi Chiangi)* follows the migration of one Sicilian family in search of a better life to the Louisiana sugar plantations for *la zucarata*, or sugar cane season. The characters, speaking in a Sicilian dialect, echo the voices of those distant generations who knew that, "La Liggi va contru i Siciliani e i niuri" ("The Law is against Sicilians and Blacks.") (Cacibauda 2009:95). In the end, Cacibauda laments that the "Sicilian" has been absorbed by the pan-ethnic "Italian" (Cacibauda 2009: 128).

Unfortunately, with the exception of one, all of these publications have largely ignored the Sicilian migration to the Shreveport-Bossier City area. Even though there are other local scholars who have written about historical and cultural aspects of the Sicilian American community in the Shreveport area, few have focused on the racial or ethnic identities of current generations. I hope to contribute to the discussion with my own research by addressing some of these issues, even if in a limited manner. The following section contains my contribution to the study of Italian Americans in Bossier City.

ITALIAN AMERICANS OF BOSSIER CITY

Brief History

When many people think of Louisiana, Shreveport and Bossier City are most likely not the first cities that come to mind. Even for many native Louisianians, the northwest portion of the state falls short compared to places like New Orleans or Lafayette when it comes to culture or entertainment. The fact of the matter is that Shreveport and Bossier have more in common with the southern half of the state than people may realize. Traveling from south Louisiana to the Shreveport area for the majority of my life now, I've noticed that people have consistently responded to my trips with a look of confusion, followed by a one word question: Why? When I tell Baton Rouge friends that I am researching the Shreveport-Bossier City Italian community I'll often get a similarly confused look as they ask, "There's Italians in Shreveport?" Truthfully, there have been times when I too have dismissed this area as not the most exciting city the state has to offer. But as I've gotten older I've learned to appreciate the rich history of the state's third largest city, a history that includes the story of a relatively large community of Italian Americans.

Approaching northwestern Louisiana from the south, the landscape alternates between farmland, rice fields, acres of pine trees, the occasional pecan orchard and the closest thing the state has to rolling hills. This area was once home for the Caddo Native Americans until they were forced out in 1859 in a mass migration to Oklahoma due to white aggression (Carruth 1971: 10). What little remains of the Caddo are found in the names of bodies of water and highways around the Shreveport area. For example, Bistinau and Bodcau are two bayous where fishermen from all around gravitate to catch

Bass, White Perch (*Sac-a-lait* in southern Louisiana), Bluegills or Chinquapins. I grew up fishing on these waters, as well as Black Bayou, Cypress Bayou, Swan Lake, and Cross Lake. The Red River that acts as a barrier between Shreveport and Bossier City provides ample opportunity for fishing tournaments. Local corner stores display pictures and fish mounted and displayed for all to see. As a child fishing with my father, it was fairly common to run into friends and relatives on the water. Fishing and hunting culture plays an integral role for many communities in northwest Louisiana, including Italian Americans.

Due to cultural and economic integration with east Texas and southern Arkansas, this corner of the state is referred to as The Arklatex or Texarkana and has been home to Sicilian immigrants since they began settling in Louisiana by the thousands during the late 19th century. The census for the year 1900 recorded only 9 Italians in Bossier Parish and 20 in Caddo Parish; thirty years later the number of Italians in those parishes jumped to 104 in Bossier and 480 in Caddo (Margavio and Salomone 2002:39). The people I interviewed were the descendants of great grandparents, grandparents and parents that traveled south from such diverse places as Illinois, Arkansas, and Wisconsin; others traveled north from South Louisiana towns and cities such as Patterson, Donaldsonville, and Alexandria. Even though some immigrants came from the port of New Orleans while others passed through Ellis Island, they were often from the same Sicilian villages or cities. Sicily is, after all, a small island and yet it made up well over half of the approximately five million that journeyed across the Atlantic at the turn of the century. The paternal grandfather of one participant came through Ellis Island while her maternal grandfather came through New Orleans and both had the same first and last name! It

made for quite an amusing wedding as the son and daughter of Mr. George Siragusa were united in matrimony. Another participant's family entered through Ellis Island and ended up employed in Chicago's factories only to realize they weren't cut out for that kind of work. So they took the train south, like so many others, and settled in the growing community of Sicilian farmers and grocers in the Shreveport area.

Following the advertisements for cheap land and a promising job market, Sicilian immigrants came to the Shreveport area armed only with the knowledge brought from their homeland, which they used to make a respectable living. Agricultural work served as the foundation on which Sicilian immigrants built their lives. Every Sicilian American I spent time with came from a family of farmers. Even my own family, who are no longer involved in any aspect of the food industry, comes from a long line of agrarians. As I was going through the archives at LSU I came across a master's thesis that included a tribute to a great uncle of mine who, I would later find out, was celebrated by the entire community as a great farmer who played an important role in the Sicilian community. During many conversations on genealogy, when I mentioned my grandmother's maiden name people would light up and ask if there was any relation to Anthony Tombrello. I'd smile and say "yes", which would often provoke people to tell stories about him. He passed away not long before this study, so people were more than happy to reminisce about their experiences with him. Unfortunately, I never met him but I am grateful that I was able to learn about him through the stories of others.

A participant told me that at one point in time there were almost twenty Italian owned grocery stores in one Shreveport neighborhood. My non-Italian grandmother, who is in her 70s, said that while growing up in Benton everyone knew that the Italians owned

all the grocery stores in Shreveport. I asked her if this was the case for Bossier as well and she said no. This may be due to the fact that there was a much larger community in Shreveport than in Bossier in those days. Shreveport served as an urban area where Italians could live, worship and conduct business in close proximity with one another. Therefore, there were many more Italian-run establishments in Shreveport than there were in Bossier, where the majority white population owned most of the land and businesses. This does not mean to imply that there weren't any Italian-owned grocery stores in Bossier. Over time, as the Italian community moved up the socio-economic ladder and migrated out of Shreveport and into various neighborhoods of Bossier City, several establishments were around to fulfill their needs for imported Italian products.

A prime example is the Mistretta family's Williams Street grocery store. A vestige of its time, the store has been in operation since the 1920s. Bob Mistretta, a second generation Sicilian American from just north of Bossier whose family-owned store has been in business for almost one hundred years, still stops in on a regular basis to visit with his family members who now run the store. He happened to be there when my father brought me by and introduced me to the Mistretta's, so I was able to talk with him for a while. Like many others, Bob's father started the business after making a good living as a truck farmer. Bob described watching both the men and women in his family work when he was a child:

Bob: Yup, he truck farmed back there. When my grandmother married my grandpa, all of the ladies back there, they'd truck farm and they'd raise carrots. Big loads of carrots. And they'd pile 'em up and take 'em to the wholesale place in Shreveport. They'd take 'em over there and they'd sell 'em...wagonloads! I can still see all them carrots just piled up! Wow! Italian people always worked. They were workers, now.

In recalling the history of the Mistretta grocery store, Bob describes how the institution of these businesses played an important role in the survival of the community:

Bob: This little store has kept a lot of people jobs, people during the depression didn't go hungry or nothin' like that. I was a pallbearer (inaudible) and people tell me, "Your daddy wouldn't let nobody go hungry". And they'd tell me, "If it weren't for your daddy, we couldn't have got by."

Bob is also related to the owner of the major produce distributor Santa Maria Produce, another mainstay of Shreveport. When questioned about this business, Bob explains that his uncle started out so many others like him:

John: Now, what about the Mistretta's, with all this downtown?

Bob: That's my cousin.

John: That's your cousin?

Bob: That's my daddy's brother. My daddy and him were brothers. My daddy brought him over from Italy and bought him a horse and wagon and he peddled for a while. Then he went in the business and he'd haul produce from New Orleans down here and sell it.

The evolution from farmers to grocery store owners aligns with the narrative of the larger Italian population of Louisiana in general. Some who didn't become grocers found their way into the food industry by establishing their own Italian restaurants. Although many of the older Italian restaurants have closed, you can still find eateries such as Monjuni's or Notini's in Bossier that cater to the local taste by serving a sweet *suga* or spaghetti sauce.

At the time of my stay in Bossier, Rocky's Bistro was a hot new eatery that offered the usual Italian American fare, from pizza to spaghetti and meatballs or chicken parmigiana. When I heard about this place, my father mentioned that my grandfather likes to eat there every week, so we decided to join him one day. The restaurant is located at the end of a shopping center off of Shed road, an historical thruway named for the

metal shed that covered it in its entirety so that cotton might be hailed out of the area untarnished by thunderstorms. The shed is no longer there but the street remains. When we walked in to the restaurant, I immediately noticed the small deli counter to the right. In the window of the cooler were meats and cheeses, milk and bread. To the left you could find uniquely Italian products, such as cans of Eggplant Appetizer (made in Sicily) and the brand *That's A Nice!* Sicilian “kiss of garlic” spread called *Bacio*. After they take your order at the counter, you have the choice between sitting at a table or a bar that runs the length of the sidewall. Lining the bar customers find cookbooks propped up against the wall. Most are generic, run of the mill Italian cookbooks that were possibly spotted in the bargain bin at Books A Million (as some of their stickers would suggest). But I found these books to be an interesting display of Sicilian American identity. A few of them were Louisiana- themed. But the one that grabbed my attention over all the rest (though the Sopranos Family Cookbook was a close runner up) was an old, worn out looking cookbook with a picture of a slightly overweight white female with no make-up on and hair frizzy and unkempt. The title read: *White Trash Cooking*.

The reason this book grabbed my attention above the rest is because it explicitly draws upon race and racial stereotypes. By virtue of the fact that it is among mostly Italian or Italian American cookbooks, it would lead one to think that the owner of the store is identifying Italian Americans with the term “white trash”. Perhaps he is making light of the idea that Italians have been considered lesser than, racially speaking, while still laying claim to some version of a white identity. Either way, the complexity of Italian American identity in Louisiana is reflected in the décor of this restaurant.

Today, the “Twin Cities” differ in some significant ways. Bossier City has a majority white population while Shreveport has a majority African American population. The former’s white population is majority Republican and the latter’s Black population is majority Democrat. Bossier City was home to the state’s first Bass Pro Shop, a major employer in addition to the Casinos and growing movie industry. Shreveport’s downtown area is currently struggling to keep up with Bossier’s Louisiana Boardwalk, a two mile stretch of stores, restaurants, an arcade and movie theatre that opened in 2005. A small trolley car runs back and forth along the riverfront that overlooks Shreveport’s Red River District, an area that is currently under revitalization efforts.

Although most Italian immigrants first settled in Shreveport, many people I spoke with belonged to families that had moved out of the city long ago and now owned land in and around Bossier. Bob’s family eventually bought hundreds of acres of land in north Bossier that allowed them to enter into the timber industry, an industry that northwestern Louisiana’s economy has relied on for decades now. In more than one conversation that occurred during my time spent with Bossier Italians, the topic of land ownership would surface as people tried to remember which Sicilian families owned how many acres of land and where. It became clear to me that land ownership was a trend and important signifier for upward social mobility for this Sicilian American community.

Italian Americans and the White Community

Though many Sicilian Americans prospered economically in the early days of settlement, they remained somewhat ostracized from the dominant white culture of Bossier Parish. People spoke of a time when an Italian couldn’t get a job from the white bosses who were in charge of handing them out due to discrimination. Furthermore, the

overwhelmingly Protestant community clashed theologically with the Catholic Sicilians. Though I was looking for examples of discrimination, I admit that I didn't expect them to be rooted in religious affiliation. Bob Mistretta, an 80-year-old man who denied any experiences of *racial* discrimination, had this to say:

Bob: Well, years ago they were kinda rough on the Italians, some of 'em. Now, when I was...with me now, when I was younger and dating some of these girls, the Baptist girls...they couldn't go with me 'cause I was a Catholic. [...] When they found out I was a Catholic, they thought I had the plague!

Despite this account, he goes on to say that he married a Baptist and "hadn't had a bit of trouble," claiming it was mostly the parents or older generation that disliked Catholics. In addition to going to separate congregations of worship, these religious differences could permeate other aspects of life for all ages. In the following excerpt, Rachel recalls growing up in Bossier much later in the 1960s at a time when all of her friends joined a masonic youth organization and she couldn't due to her Catholic identity. Rachel, a third generation Italian American now in her early 50s, recalls the awkwardness she faced when a friend's mother asked if she was a part of the organization:

Rachel: You know, being so heavily Baptist around here, everybody was in Rainbow Girls. And I can remember somebody's mother giving me a ride home after some function at school one night or something and, uh, the mother said, "Are you in Rainbow Girls?" And Renee says to her mother, "No, she's Catholic." And the mother goes... (makes a surprised face).

Since the Rainbow Girls is a Masonic organization that the Catholic Church didn't allow its parishioners to join, Rachel's uncommon religious affiliation made for an uncomfortable situation. Other members of Rachel's generation, such as Stacy and Debby, suggested that these attitudes of religious prejudice still existed for some people. In fact, one of Debby's comments suggested that ethnicity and religion went hand in hand when she stated that, "You caught hell for being Catholic and your last name." This was

even indicated by some of the jokes that were told at a Catholic convention in Shreveport, where one priest remarked that Catholics in this area continue to have to remind people that they are Christians, too.

In the same conversation with Debby, Stacy and Stacy's brother Joseph (who is almost twenty years older than Stacy), this major cultural difference between southern and northern Louisiana became evident when Joseph recalled how his south Louisiana school would let out for St. Joseph's Day, the most celebrated religious holiday for Louisiana's Sicilian communities. After Joseph made this comment, Debby, who has lived just north of Bossier her entire life, laughed at the idea that the city's school board would ever recognize this holiday much less let Catholic children out of school for it. It does appear to me that the predominately Catholic southern Louisiana cities like New Orleans have quite large celebrations that may involve the entire city while the St. Joseph's Day celebrations in the Shreveport-Bossier City area are only noticeable to those who attend the participating churches.

Following international trends, Catholicism today has had difficulties with the diminishing number of priests in the area and therefore has had to bring in those willing to do the job from other countries. As I listened to my family talk after one Sunday Mass over spaghetti, meatballs and homemade Ciabatta bread, I realized that many of them visit different churches regularly due to their search for a priest they can relate to. There were complaints regarding the accent of a new South African priest, as some felt it was difficult to understand him. Cultural differences can also be the source of discomfort or disapproval. Referring to these types of issues among parishioners like my family

members, a priest at the Shreveport Diocese convention remarked that north Louisianians weren't Roman Catholics, but Roamin' Catholics.

A lack of priests isn't the only issue the Church struggles with when trying to increase their attendance numbers. I asked Debby if her two sons went to Catholic church and she told me that one did and one didn't. She said the one who didn't went to a more liberal, nondenominational church called The Simple Church, located at Bossier's Boardwalk. The mission statement for The Simple Church's website states that the church is for "those of us who are tired of religion getting in the way of knowing who God is." Debby says that she understands why her son doesn't go a Catholic church now, but hopes that he returns one day when he is older. She realizes that "the Church hasn't moved forward much" and says its more about tradition than believing in every aspect of it's doctrine.

Debby's response wasn't the only one that expressed a growing disconnect with the religion of her predecessors. Other comments on religious practices were not as openly critical, yet they manage to illuminate an ideological shift that has occurred since that initial migration. Sicilians, and Catholics in general, have been criticized by the Protestant community for the many rituals performed, including those that go along with the worshipping of Saints. During my stay, I was surprised to hear several participants describe the Catholicism of their Old World relatives as "superstitious." Peter stated that Sicilians lost "a superstitious way of life, a Sicilian way of life" and to clarify, he followed this remark by saying, "I mean that in a positive way." Rachel's description of the film *The Golden Door* similarly pokes fun at this "superstitious way of life":

Rachel: But you've got to go into it understanding that, like I said, these people dirty, nasty. The thing I liked about it and this, when I saw the movie, what made me want to do the panel discussion was, did you ever hear your family talk about the 'scondu'?

Jamie: No.

Rachel: When they would take you to the ladies that would massage your stomach and pray over you when you....

Jamie: No!

Rachel: ...yeah. And 'scondu' actually means, like, the scare. Like you've been scared sick or something, I don't know. And, uh, which the older, like my mother's generation, they were always nervous wrecks, they were so, you know, everybody was afraid to swim. I always said, "How can you come from this island in the middle of the Mediterranean and everybody's afraid of the water!?"

Jamie: Yeah

Rachel: You know, they were scared of everything. And, uh, yeah...people in my mother's generation and a few people in my generation were brought to these old ladies that would massage the scondu out of you and that was in this movie.

To illustrate how Catholics and Protestants in Bossier have over time diminished the ideological gap between the two, Rachel indicates that the two groups are closer than they once were:

Rachel: You know, and uh, yeah! They're really, they're really...and the funny thing is as everybody's mellowed out over the years, I mean the Baptists, most of them will now drink a glass of wine and everything, they're not as uptight and regimented as they used to be. It's almost like now it's turned around where we kind of make fun of the Baptists. (laughs) And I guess among our own circles we always did.

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: But I mean now just out, you know, out socially you can kind of make fun, you know, about the Baptists with the way they used to be about the drinking and dancing and I think that's really, that's really gotten diluted in their culture over the years.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: But, yeah, there really was a, you know, a thing about...and it's funny because I've always had the same feeling towards Protestants. (laughs)

Italian Americans and the Black Community

Like other communities in Louisiana, Italian Americans have shared a relationship with the African American community that has been, at times, very intimate. While they no longer live in close proximity as they once did, Italian grocery stores continue to cater to Black customers, as well as an increasing number of Hispanics. As the Bossier Press reported in 2012, Bossier City is one of the top one hundred cities in the nation in terms of economic growth, a growth that is based on new construction. This growth is also reflected in the growing Hispanic community. When I asked people about this relationship with the Black community, people were surprisingly open and spoke with me candidly about this. Debby seemed happy to discuss her experiences:

Debby: ... in north Louisiana blacks and Italians got along just fine. (laughs)

Jamie: Yeah?

Debby: Because they were dependent upon each other. Either through farming...every, uh, that little brown building back there is where our farm help lived.

Jamie: Oh, okay.

Debby: My grandfather took care of them, because he was dependent on them to pick crops and they were dependent upon him to...to live.

Jamie: Yeah.

Debby: You know, 'cause they didn't have any money. So they lived there free and they worked for him and they supported each other.

In addition to the economic ties, Debby describes the kind of intimacy shared between Sicilian and Black farmers who worked and lived together in an amicable environment.

Debby:...and the Pastero's, you know, they all farmed. That's who owned all this out here. Well, each of 'em had their farm help livin' there. And the only ones that I ever went to spend the night with were my cousins. We'd get up in the mornin' and come back

to Essa Lee's house 'cause she'd make big ole biscuits. "Essa Lee you got any...?" I mean, it was just...you came in and out.

Jamie: Yeah.

Debby: Whatever we got for Christmas, they got for Christmas. Whether it was motorbikes or whatever. My daddy used to always say he was going to come home and find a cross burnin' in his yard. Because people would come by and they'd see us all playin' together.

Though Debby's father would never be a victim of such tactics of intimidation, the joke alone recognizes the possibility of such an outcome. As if to further show how the white community took notice of the relationship between Sicilians and Black people, Debby tells me about her memory of racial integration in Bossier City schools, something that didn't take effect until the 1970s.

Debby: I know when they integrated schools here in '70...I think in '70, is when they integrated schools.... they closed the black school and brought them up here and I knew all of 'em! [...] I grew up with them.

As Shreveport built more black schools in the 1960s in an effort to avoid integration and Bossier Parish became the seat of one of the first lawsuits filed against a school for refusing to comply with new integration laws, I can only imagine how students reacted to Debby's relationships with the new African American students (Burton 1983: 89). Of those I interviewed, Debby was one of the few to openly discuss the role that Black people played in the success of the Sicilian community. She did not seem to want to distance herself or her people from the Black community nor was she ashamed of the closeness between the two. Regardless of the economic disparities that continued to grow as the decades went on, Debby maintained her social relationships with the people she grew up playing with, eating with, and working alongside of.

Debby: I mean, they were, you know, they were poor and farmin' and so there was a camaraderie.

Jamie: Yeah.

Debby: Yeah, 'cause when I would get around a person that was black they'd say, "We know you're Italian. We can tell you're Italian." They just knew.

The two groups have a history of amicable relations that were based on a symbiotic alliance that benefitted everyone involved. The fact that some Black people have openly admitted that they view Italians differently than they do the white population demonstrates the dependence and amicability that has historically existed between the two groups.

As stated earlier, this wasn't just the case in north Louisiana. An example of the early integration of Sicilians and African Americans comes from an interview with Joseph, a third generation Sicilian American who grew up in St. Landry parish. Joseph's family benefitted from the availability of cheap farmland and as farmers they worked and lived alongside Black families for as long as Joseph could remember. In a conversation that had little to do with race relations, Joseph casually mentioned the friendship his grandfather had with a young Black boy.

Joseph: But he stayed with my aunt, his oldest daughter. They owned some land and he built him a little house right next to theirs and she would cook him breakfast and he would go eat and everything. He...they had a black guy that used to work for him. Matter of fact, they raised him from a little boy. And they would, uh, at the first of the month when he'd get his check, the black guy had a truck and he would take him to town and he'd get him a case of wine.

These stores not only served Italian neighborhoods, but also the African American customers that lived in or near those neighborhoods. Decades ago the neighborhood known as The Bottoms, one of the most notoriously dangerous neighborhoods adjacent to downtown Shreveport, was home to an Italian grocery store called Ruby's (Burton 1983: 66). In addition to paying customers, African Americans in some cases provided security

for the owners of these stores. While talking with my grandfather about the days when he was delivering beer to these Italian stores in Shreveport, he told me that there was usually a Black resident who would “guard” the store in exchange for store credit, making sure no one robbed the place. He told me the story of a drunk man catching him outside the store, who made the mistake of putting his hands on him. Dominick responded by threatening to kill the man right then and there. He says that other Black people standing outside watching just said, “Do it, Mr. Dominick!”

Debby’s family decided to open a store on the outskirts of town for different reasons than most. More as a means of escape, her father opened up a convenient store later on in life after a tragedy struck the family. Like so many others, Debby’s family lived in a house right next to the store. She believes that it is because her children grew up in the store, and subsequently in the presence of Black people on a regular basis, that they are more tolerant and comfortable with other different backgrounds. She brought this up while telling me about how one of her sons tutors a young Black student and has helped him get a scholarship by personally driving him to the places he needed to be since he had no other transportation. She also tells me that even though the family sold the store, she often sees old friends who still stop by the store and will wave to her on her front porch. In the following excerpt, Debby mentions the system of store credit that many relied on to feed their families.

Debby: But then as Italians left the farm and they went into little mom and pop stores around this area, they did business by credit.

Jamie: Yeah.

Debby: And the blacks needed it.

Jamie: Yeah.

Debby: And they were farmin' still. If you had a two week rainy spell, guess what? They didn't work. So they were dependent on him to carry them until they got paid.

This closeness and familiarity between these two communities most likely slowed the integration of Italian Americans into the white community of Bossier. It is interesting to note that while one community went on to adopt the identity of white Americans, Black people lack the ability to cross over these racial boundaries and perhaps as a result have been denied the same degree of upward social mobility.

Travel and Identity

Due to this economic security that many of my participants have cultivated, they are able to travel on vacations regularly. For many Italian Americans in Shreveport and Bossier, traveling to places of ethnic relevance is one way of connecting with their ethnic identity. This includes visiting places in Louisiana, the U.S., and Italy. Debby told me about her trips to New Orleans during St. Joseph's celebrations and "Dago Hill" (now called "The Hill"), a large Italian enclave in St. Louis, Missouri. She spoke in wonderment of how people there on the Hill spoke in Italian and walked to the Italian market everyday to buy produce and other Italian food staples such as cheese, wine, and bread. Debby is afraid of flying, unless her friends Stacy and Joseph, who just got back from a trip to Italy and Sicily.

Rachel has benefitted from this rise in ethnic tourism by putting together group travel packages and accompanying a group of twenty or so on a whirlwind vacation across the Italian peninsula. The trip itself is usually about two weeks long and consists of visiting the Vatican, Venice, Florence, the leaning tower of Pisa, and other major tourist attractions (since I've done this research Rachel has put on group trips that

exclusively go to Sicily). Then the group visits the Sicilian island, traversing as much of the terrain as possible in the short amount of time they are there. Joseph told me he believed they were in Sicily for about four days when he and his family went.

Rachel also connects people with their long lost Sicilian family if possible. Joseph and Stacy were able to contact some relatives they had never met before and arrange a meeting. While neither Joseph nor Stacy spoke Italian, Joseph said that of the nine family members that showed up a few were able to speak English with them. Unfortunately, they were only able to spend roughly four hours with their family members since their itinerary wasn't very flexible. It is interesting to me that we Sicilian Americans travel to Italy to gain some sense of our ethnic heritage, yet spend a majority of the time in the land of our ancestors' oppressors. I say "we" because I, too, am guilty of spending a summer in Italy and never traveling south of Rome.

Joseph was one of the participants in the last trip to Italy and Sicily that Rachel regularly arranges with the help of a travel agency. Like many, his family heard about it through the church and signed up. After they agreed to go, Rachel decided she would also try to connect people with their long lost Sicilian relatives:

Joseph: She [Rachel] said, "And we'll see if we can get in touch with any of 'em and find y'all's relatives." And she did and I think the first two families, they said they didn't have anybody that came to America.

Jamie: Oh, really?

Joseph: Yeah. So, anyway, the third family... well, the one that we met, they said, "Yeah."

Jamie: They remembered having relatives come over?

Joseph: Yeah. They had, you know, uh, I think they grandmaw had a brother... couple brothers that came close to when my grandpaw and his brother came. I think his brother

came later, I don't think he came with my grandpaw. He came later, but he didn't come to Louisiana. He came to California. He went to California.

Joseph and his sister Stacy met up with nine members of their family at their hotel. He seemed very impressed with the group, as most were educators and a few spoke English. This was the only way they could communicate since both Joseph and Stacy don't speak much Italian. Joseph said he got a tape to help him learn a few phrases before they went. They only had time to visit for about four hours since they were only in Sicily for four days and they couldn't really leave their travel group. He said another fellow traveller wanted to visit a cemetery where she possibly had kin, but they didn't have time because when they got there the cemetery was closed. Joseph described the trip as mostly going to cathedrals and seeing things he had previously only seen on t.v. Still, Joseph reiterates the importance of this ethnic travel:

Joseph: And, you know, it's sad to know that every Italian.... should at least pay one trip over there, just to see where we came from. [...] But we got to see a lot of that, when, you know, we go on our own we can go see some things that we want to see, you know what I'm sayin'?

Jamie: Yeah.

Joseph: Not see all these places that we done been seen already, you know what I'm sayin'?

Rachel's involvement with local and state Italian American organizations such as the Sons of Italy (SOI) is fueled by her desire to bring honor and prestige to the ethnic organization. She has cultivated a reputation for herself as a cultural liaison by heading the SOI activities, as well as setting up the biannual group vacation packages for those wanting to visit their ancestors' homeland. She is educated in business and her job allowed her to travel to Italy multiple times a year. She also went to school abroad in Italy, so she speaks fluent Italian. Her views, though they were often at odds with the

those of the other participants I interviewed, are highly influenced by academic discourse on Italian culture and her goals center around garnering attention for the Italian

Americans of Louisiana by representing them and presenting them in a specific light:

Rachel: ...but I think those Italian, you know, and I think that's why it's all gotten so...diluted now, but I mean, you know, I also feel like assimilation was accomplished. You know, we don't need anything from anybody, we don't need to stand out. I only, as an officer in the Sons of Italy I just want us to stand out...in a very good way because, um, from my parents' generation I know about when there was prejudice...against them. And, um, I still, so...we became a 5013c service club, that's why there are women in the Sons of Italy here, because when you become a non-profit you can't discriminate against anybody.

Jamie: Oh, really?

Rachel: And so when the Sons of Italy went from being just a pleasure club to a social club to a service organization they started lettin' women in. And when I moved here and got involved in it, I just really started pushin' for us supporting projects in a big way. Like when they had the earthquake in Abruzzo...

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: ...we, um, I started this email thing and got us in the newspaper and everything and in two weeks we collected sixty five hundred dollars and sent it over there.

Jamie: Wow.

Rachel: And, um, I just spearhead all these real fundraisers and I'm the media person. I make sure we get in the news.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: You know, I get our picture taken anywhere I can, with our banner and everything.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: And, uh, I just, uh, you know, and never from a frame of reference, "Well, we all used to be poor and everything." No! Just that Sons of Italy donated all this, you know, we got them the altar at Holy Trinity. Sons of Italy gave a thousand dollars to the Holy Trinity restoration fund.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: Just, you know, and I just make sure we give out a lot of money and, uh...you know, like I said, never refer to bad times or anything. And that's, I don't ever want to, uh...no, I won't go into that. Anyway, I just always like for us to... you know, just almost like the Jews. "Hey, we're all prosperous people, we work hard, we're...you know, we're, we're happy, we're doin' well and we want to help others." You know...

Firstly, Rachel's comments regarding the Melting Pot Discourse on assimilation came up in multiple interviews with members of her generation, thus proving how influential this theory continues to be for the identities of Italian Americans. As a result, a few participants expressed themselves to be or not being Italian enough for this study, or as one journalist put it, a "counterfeit Italian." Secondly, the desire to move past these hardships that Sicilian immigrants encountered for some time is perhaps indicative of a desire to not stand apart from mainstream, white America. Rachel stresses assimilation in a positive light and she compares the history of Italian Americans to the history of the Jews in this country. Interestingly, she chose another group that is today mostly accepted as white rather than a more racially ambiguous group, like Hispanics or Mexicans. Older participants did use this increasingly visible community to describe how Italian Americans have been treated in the past, but mostly due to the similarities in their experiences as immigrants. My grandfather said that Italian Americans saved their money, "like the Mexicans today" and Bob made the following comments that suggest there were other similarities as well:

Bob: No, no. The thing is, back then, like the Mexicans today, they didn't know nobody so all the Italians stayed together, you know what I mean?

John: Right.

Bob: They took care of one another and stayed together, you know. But now, you know, our generation, growin' up, you know, I got more American friends than Italian friends!

These comments regarding the evolution of the Italian community suggest that Italians have become integrated into the mainstream white culture in Bossier. This integration was accomplished using several different avenues, one of which appears to be sports. Several participants brought up their involvement with organized sports growing up in the 1950s/60s. At that time, there were separate leagues for Catholics and Italians. During an interview with Father Siragusa, he explicitly stated that football was how his father and uncle became accepted in Bossier. Debby recalled her father's involvement:

Debby: So he played on the all-Italian baseball league. And so they traveled with baseball... and my dad was pretty good with sports. I remember the old-timer greats, we would watch 'em play. We would go to St. Louis, we'd go to Houston... So, I was raised with sports.

Another participant who discussed sports was Bob. While he doesn't explicitly say that sports are the reason why he was accepted by whites, his comments on how he was treated by "the Americans boys" suggest that this may have been the case. The fact that he feels a need to clarify that he succeeded on his own rather than due to his family's influence might suggest that this was not too common at the time:

Bob: ...and we all three played football. And my mama and daddy didn't go down and talk to anybody, we played on our own. We made it on our own.

Jamie: Oh, okay.

Bob: Last year they put my picture up in the football hall of fame in Bossier, in the Bossier library.

Jamie: Nice!

Bob: And, uh, they never did, they always (inaudible)... been nice to me. Like I say, they never called me and my brother a slang name. Maybe to others they did, but not us. We run with 'em, we was good and better than most of 'em.

Another common theme from the interviews I conducted deals with work ethics. Almost every participant pointed to a strong work ethic among Sicilian immigrants to

explain their economic advancements. Father Siragusa talked with me about how Sicilians were living proof that anybody could make it in America. Similarly, Bob talked about his family's hard work and dedication that allowed them to come to own one of the largest produce distributors in the northwest Louisiana.

Rachel had the following to say:

Rachel: So, I mean it was such a quick turn around. They came over and somehow they started businesses and bought land. Most of my parents' generation were all business people...

Jamie: Mm-hmm.

Rachel: ...and then my generation, we were all university graduates. So it was such, such a quick turn around...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...considering their, uh, you know, their humble beginnings.

[...]

Jamie: Yeah. Do you, what do you think you could attribute that quick turn around to?

Rachel: Oh, I think they did just have an incredible work ethic and the fact that they had the freedom to make their money and keep their money and of course as everybody will say, they had big families and their children helped them.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: And then of course those children were raised with a good work ethic.

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: And, uh, so yeah, everybody just said that they were very good, hard workers. And, uh, yeah...they obviously had a real strong work ethic. I guess after making that long voyage, you know, I mean it's not like everything was wonderful when they first got here but I guess they saw that it could be.

While no one explicitly stated that other racial or ethnic groups lack the type of work ethic that catapulted Italian Americans into financial security, I can't help but think of the

implications. Even though people spoke of a time when no one would hire an Italian, no one gave this as a reason for why so many Italian Americans went into business for themselves. Scholars have pointed to this idea of a strong work ethic and refusal to take assistance from anyone, something many say is inaccurate, as an indication of the ideological adoption of American Individualism (Conzen 1992: 5). This ideological stance ignores the prejudices and the obstacles that stand in the way of many groups obtaining financial independence. This is further demonstrated by one participant's insistence that Black people segregate themselves because they do not want to live next to white people. While that may be true to an extent, I doubt that Black people would choose to live in poverty stricken neighborhoods simply in order to avoid white people.

Another common thread found within the interviews relates to inter-marriage and its affects on the process of assimilation. Almost all of the participants I spoke with said that marrying non-Italians contributed to the diluting of Italian culture among younger generations. Father Siragusa said that, "Today, the Jones's are marrying the Siragusa's" and that this is evidence of the "great American melting pot." Peter stated that out of seven siblings only two didn't marry other Italian Americans. In contrast, out of the eighteen children of these siblings only one married an Italian, something that had their grandmother "throwing fits about it." When I asked Rachel how Sicilian traditions are passed on, she had this to say:

Rachel: I think it all depends on whether people continue to marry Italian Americans or not. Because like my parents were both, you know, that generation with the parents from Sicily and they married and so we grew up very, very Italian.

Rachel suggests that growing up "very, very Italian" is now a thing of the past. Father Siragusa pointed out that during this shift between generations, American identity took

precedent over ethnic identity as “ideological differences began to wane.” The growing practice of intermarriage is both a cause and result of this phenomenon.

This section was meant to provide historical and cultural context and insight into some of the current practices and attitudes of members of the Italian American community in Bossier City. The following section takes a more in-depth look at the discourse generated by these interviews and attempts to analyze how the use of labels constructs and indexes racial and ethnic identity. Within this section, I will explore the use of labels used to describe both the Italian American community and the white community.

ANALYSIS OF LABELS

Historical accounts of Louisiana's racially motivated hostility towards southern Italians seldom appear in any educational curriculum, both within the universities and Louisiana's Italian American social organizations. Rachel's feels compelled to disregard this history of discrimination, stating, "I just make sure we [...] never refer to bad times or anything." It is likely in part due to efforts like this to downplay the hardships suffered by southern Italian immigrants that have diminished the specificity of their identity and history. As a result, the history of Sicilians perceived racial inferiority remains a forgotten past for many of us who proudly self-identify simply as "Italian", often without realizing that our Sicilian ancestors may have never set foot on Italian soil. This transformative process is reflected in the ethnic labels adopted by individuals, families, and the Louisiana community as a whole today. Since ethnic labels linguistically perform identity via indexicality I wanted to understand what was being indexed by the use of "Italian" vs "Sicilian".

With this in mind, I put the following question to every participant that I engaged in conversation with: "Why do we call ourselves Italian and not Sicilian?" The most common response was some variation of, "I don't know why, but we've just always called ourselves Italian." A first generation Italian American born in 1932, Anthony gave the following response to my question, "Why do we call ourselves Italian and not Sicilian?":

Anthony: Most... Well, because at one time they were ashamed about it because only prisoners were sent to Sicily. When they sent 'em to jail, they didn't send 'em to Rome in a jail. They sent 'em to Sicily. And they'd roam the island.

John: Mm-hmm.

Anthony: Wasn't nothin' else to do. They couldn't go nowhere, so they'd roam that island.

John: Just kinda puttin' 'em away somewhere.

Anthony: Just get rid of 'em. But a real Italian don't wanna be called a Sicilian anyhow. And a Sicilian don't wanna be called an Italian.

Jamie: Right.

Anthony: They want you to know, "I'm better than any of the people." I said, "Where you from?" He said, "My people from Sicily." That's the way they were.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: But with time they all fell in line, you know. Which is good, I imagine.

My research on Sicilian history turned up nothing to support the idea that the island was ever used as a penal colony. Still, his assertion that Sicilians were "ashamed" of being Sicilian may ring true for other reasons given their history in this state.

Anthony's grandparents arrived from Sicily at the height of anti-Sicilian sentiment and settled just outside of New Orleans in Patterson, LA. As I've pointed out, this was a period when the growing consensus among politicians and educators alike was that Sicilians, unlike Northern Italians, were an undesirable people who brought violence and organized crime wherever they went. Regarding these "new immigrants", a newspaper called *Daily States* argued for stricter immigration laws by claiming that these immigrants were "not Italians, but Sicilians" (Baiamonte 1992: 124). Anthony's family would most likely have come into contact with some of the vitriolic, racist propaganda supporting the political campaign that eventually halted immigration from Southern Europe. Understandably, the consequences of openly identifying as Sicilian during such an era of hostility would've made things difficult for those immigrant families that were

just trying to make a living without conflict or confrontation. Anthony may not really know why he has always identified as an Italian from Sicily rather than as a Sicilian. What he does seem to remember is that at one point it was a shameful thing to be a Sicilian.

Anthony's comments regarding Sicilians not wanting to be called Italian and vice versa indicates that for him there did exist a difference between the two, enough so that it was to everyone's chagrin when one be mistaken for the other. When we spoke of my study abroad summer semester in northern Italy, Anthony spoke of what he thought some of the differences were between northern and southern Italians.

Jamie: I went to Rome, a little north of Naples. And then I was in Bologna which is, in north...it's about fifty miles west of Venice. So it's up there. I've never been to south Italy, though, or Sicily. I really hope to go soon.

Anthony: You know, they're different.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: Completely different people. Them northern Italians...(inaudible)...they'll take them shoes off of ya.

Jamie: Yeah?

Anthony: If you sit there long enough. The ones down south, you know down around Sicily and stuff like 'at, they're...uh...anything, uh....you know where the shoe....boot, looks like a boot?

Jamie: Yup.

Anthony: And there's the heel down there and all of that? Now them people from below the ankle would be...all over Sicily... were different kind of people.

Jamie: Mm-hmm.

Anthony: They'd help and do extra things, you know. But them guys from up north, man...If you meet some of 'em now, they kinda one sided, you know. Like that right there, um...aw hell...he's got Lunin brothers right there on Line Ave. He used to have Little Italiano.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: You talk to them and you'd see, man they're switchin' the way...they talk....

Jamie: Really?

Anthony:towards people, yeah. They talk good if it's all for them, but if it ain't then they don't talk good.

This excerpt demonstrates how cultural differences in Italy were passed down through at least the first American born generation and translated in an American context. Anthony's parents would have been classified as "Southern Italians", as was dictated by the government census. While this surely did little to mollify any ethnic tension that existed between the two racially and geographically defined groups, Anthony's comments regarding their "falling in line" would seem to suggest that there was good reason for the Sicilian to conform to the Italian identity, that there was an advantage to this that was ultimately "a good thing." It wasn't long until families forgot that they weren't actually Italian.

My own family was no different. I've always called myself an Italian first and only when prompted to provide a more precise location would I offer up the response, "Well, actually, I'm Sicilian." While most discourse generated by the Sicilian American communities of Louisiana no longer emphasizes the distinction between Italian and Sicilian, the academic discourse of my official education in Italian studies simply ignored Sicilian history, culture and language. Though it wasn't until I took a college course in Italian history that I became aware of the significant linguistic and cultural differences between the many geographic regions of present day Italy, Sicilian history was not a part

of any course curriculum. If I wanted to access this information, I had to seek it out on my own.

It may not be surprising that the average person who isn't able to devote a significant amount of their time researching the history of their ethnic group would be in the dark on the matter of the history of their ethnic background. But even some scholars are stumped as to why the Sicilian label was abandoned all those years ago. Rachel, a prime example, spends a great deal of her time embracing her Italian identity. Her thoughts on the distinction (or lack thereof) between Italian and Sicilian testify to the fact that even if one studies Italian and Sicilian history and culture it is still somewhat unclear as to how one identity thrived while the other was mostly forgotten. In the following statements, Rachel attempts to answer my question regarding the loss of the Sicilian label. The last thing I asked her was, "Did your family call themselves Italian or Sicilian?"

Rachel: They called themselves Italian...I have a lot of answers to that.

Jamie: Okay.

Rachel: My answer would have like a part a, b, c and d. (laughs)

Jamie: Alright!

Rachel: First of all, my grandfather's generation that came during the great immigration, who were illiterate first of all, I mean, if you can imagine livin' in a world without any of the media that we have today...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...and being illiterate, not being able to read either, but they...you know, the great immigration was just, it started about the time that Garibaldi unified Italy.

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: So, their...when they said they were Sicilian, I mean, there wasn't even an Italy. I have a feeling that my grandfather wouldn't have known much about the unification of Italy.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: So, I wonder if like the first ones, especially, you know, like his parents' generation, I don't even know if they would've known a difference between, you know, known about Sicily and Italy. I just think for them, it was Sicily. But then I think, you know, with later people it was, you know, they called themselves, you know.... 'cause you're right, my mother, my mother always called herself Italian. My grandmother who was born here called herself Italian. You know, I think my grandfather, who, like I said, was illiterate and came from Sicily, I think he always called himself Sicilian.

Rachel, having studied Italian and Sicilian history formally and informally, attempts to answer the question by suggesting that Sicilians knew nothing of Italy or an Italian identity prior to their coming to America. While she does say that her Sicilian-born grandfather identified as Sicilian and her grandmother, who was born here, referred to herself as Italian, Rachel doesn't really guess why that may be. Yet later on in the interview I think she comes closer to an answer in the form of her own questions regarding Americans' views of Italians compared to their views on what she calls "Italian Americans":

Jamie: Yeah. What do you think about American popular images of Italians and Sicilians in particular?

Rachel: Well, what I th... never understand, kind of going back to, like, the original prejudices and everything is how everybody always thought that, you know, Italians in Italy were just fabulous, you know, that they had all this sense of style, that they had this, they had that. I mean, everybody just thinks that Italians in Italy were everything, it's like... But then there was always this lack of regard for Italian Americans (laughs). I never...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...I always thought that was kind of incongruous, of course we got, you know, the poorest... the poorest Italians came over here...

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: ... I mean, if you go into poor parts of Naples or Palermo or anywhere you still see people that are, you know, are very rough...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...around the edges, you know.

By Rachel's own description, the immigrants that gave birth to America's Little Italies were vastly different from the glorified image of America's Italy. They didn't come from the Tuscan hillsides or picturesque Venetian landscapes but were from the "poor parts of Naples or Palermo." When she states that "...of course, we got the poorest" Italians, she is not only using the pronoun "we" to identify herself as an American but her excuse for such incongruence draws on an American discourse that makes a racialized cultural distinction between northern and southern Italians (later translating, as Rachel points out, to Italians and Italian Americans). In fact, I would argue that "Italian Americans" could easily be replaced with "Sicilian" or "Sicilian Americans". Clearly, Sicilians had much to gain from adopting an Italian identity in a country that praised Italian culture while simultaneously disregarding Sicilians as "illiterate", "poor" and "rough around the edges". Even this binary linguistic category of literate/illiterate engages in white ideology (Bucholtz 2001:4).

Social scholars and historical authors writing about the Sicilian communities of Louisiana have used the terms "Italian" and "Sicilian" interchangeably, effectively softening (if not completely erasing) any distinction. Some choose phrases that are slightly confusing, such as "Sicilians of Italian background" or "Sicilian Italians", bringing to mind the rather dubious reports and documents produced by the US government, such as birth certificates and death certificates. One participant shared his grandfather's death certificate with me during one of my visits and in the space for City and Country it said: City: Sicily, Country: Italy. Indeed, my own great grandfather's

death certificate reads simply “Italy” for his and his parents’ birthplace, with no mention of their the only homeland they knew, Sicily.

Using the term “Italian” as a synonym for “Sicilian” (or “Italian American” rather than “Sicilian American”) not only erases the cultural distinction, but also further validates the ideological notion that being Italian is “better”. The only exception I encountered still managed to reinforce this idea while manipulating it in order to invest power via a Sicilian identity. In this specific context, the term “Sicilian”, consistently synonymous with unlawfulness, danger, and violence was valued over the less threatening and more commonly condoned “Italian” label.

Michael, originally from Brooklyn, NY, is a third generation Italian American whose family migrated from Naples, making him the only non-Sicilian in the community that I interviewed. Michael recalled a time when gangster films such as Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* were just starting to gain popularity in his Brooklyn neighborhood. These films intrigued audiences, often times by exploiting the image of the Sicilian *Mafioso*. This film and many more effectively started a cultural trend that romanticized organized crime.

Michael: ...I mean, they made it a point to say you couldn’t be the boss of the family unless you were Sicilian.

Jamie: Yeah.

Michael: It was a gla...see, well a lot of people that weren’t even from Sicily! I knew they were Italian, they were from Naples...well, their family was. I’d say, “Where are you from?” “Oh, Sicily.” Everybody was from Sicily!

Jamie: Yeah? (laughs)

Michael: I mean, that was the real goomahs.

Jamie: That was the real deal?

Michael: Yeah. I think that may be changing now, but that's... In the 60s and 70s, you had to be Sicilian, a really *bad* Italian.

“Passing for Sicilian” in 1960s New York was a move that capitalized on the discourse of the immoral Sicilian in order to gain *machismo*. In New York City, at that time, to be seen as someone who doesn't care about the law, someone with political connections, or as someone with a violent disposition could gain a person a lot of respect in the eyes of certain parts of the community. The reasons for claiming the “Sicilian” label in this instance was to invest in oneself an identity that embraced the “outlaw” image, which constituted a position of power.

Yet even this negative discourse was eventually subsumed under the more all-encompassing Italian identity. During the next excerpt from my interview with Rachel, I specifically used the term Sicilian in my line of questioning, yet Rachel used Italian and Italian American to talk about a specifically Sicilian phenomenon: the mafia.

Jamie: Is there any validity to those...some perceive as negative images, like of the mafia and things of that nature? Or do you think that's all sort of a romanticized...

Rachel: Well, I think even Americans like, I think they like it from, you know, all the intrigue and, you know, glamour of it.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: I don't think Americans even, you know, have a problem with that. (Laughs) They seem to really like it and I think sometimes for us Italian Americans, 'cause it's hard to, you know, I don't even, you know, I don't get all, you know..... ruffled about it, you know.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: Because it's something that people just love. And so, you know, I, uh, you know, I'm one of these people that loves to tell somebody, you know, I'm going to call my cousin Guido...

Jamie: Right, right!

Rachel: ... if you don't get your act right, you know.

The Italian label has been appropriated by the Sicilian communities in America over the course of a very short period of time. Used to index negative characteristics that were specifically found to be threatening to American society, such as poverty, illiteracy, violence, lawlessness, and genetic inferiority, "Sicilian" has in large part been abandoned in favor of an Italian identity that allowed Sicilians to avoid "damning racial identification" (Roediger 2003:228). Perhaps no label encapsulates the Americanized translation of ethnic identities more than the self-identified "Italian American". The hyphenated label "Italian-American" has its origins in a period of America's history when many were deciding that they wanted to embrace their ethnic heritage rather than allow it to disappear. During a few interviews it became apparent that it was very important to some people for me to understand that they did NOT consider themselves to be Italian but that they identified themselves as Americans of Italian descent. Each one of these individuals was from a generation that was coming of age in the 60s and 70s, the exact time of the white ethnic movement that was choosing to take back their ethnic pride. The older generations who grew up during a time of Progressive era assimilationist politics did not share these same concerns with me. While discussing some general characteristics of Italian people, Michael broke topic to explain the following to me:

Michael: But, yeah, they're stubborn and they like...they have one mind and they don't want to change. That's with...not all of 'em. And things are changin'. In fact, one of the things I want to make sure you understand, I don't consider myself an Italian. I'm an Italian American.

Jamie: Right.

Michael: I'm an American of Italian descent. Just like they do with the African American...that's what they are. Americans from Africa or an Italian from Italy. But, being an Italian has a lot to do with my life and my philosophy and the way things are in my family, because that's where I grew up and that's how I grew up.

It is interesting to note that while Michael felt the need to point out that he was not Italian, in the very next sentence he claims that being Italian "has a lot to do with [...] my philosophy." If the distinction between being an Italian born in Italy and an Italian born in America is so great as to warrant him pointing it out to me (even though it was obvious he was not a native of Italy), what does it mean to follow an "Italian philosophy" and way of life? How useful is this term "Italian" in situations like these? In another interview with Rachel, the sentiment was taken a step further when she claimed that it was wrong of someone to not make this distinction clear when identifying themselves using ethnic labels. At the same time, this excerpt also demonstrates how a speaker uses both "Italian" and "Sicilian" as interchangeable terms.

Rachel: What bothers me now is so many generations have turned over...I hate people that call themselves Italian when they've been born in this country for years. If they had a passport, their passport is American. They don't speak a word of Italian and they call themselves Italian. That drives me crazy.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: Absolutely drives me crazy. To me, that's a real...that's just a real ignorance to me, when they call themse...you know, I will always call myself Italian American because my passport is not Italian.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: And so I always say to people, "Are you talkin' about Italians or you talkin' about Italian Americans?" I mean, I make a great distinction...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...between somebody who's from Italy, because...you probably know, especially if you go to Sicily, what I always tell people, especially the people who have never been there and say, "Oh, and I just want to go back and live over there." (laughs)

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: And I just tell 'em, "If you go over there, what you are going to learn is how American you are rather than how Sicilian you are, I promise you."

Jamie: Right.

Rachel: I promise you! (laughs) You know, I mean people have no idea how different our, our cultures and our lifestyles are until they go down there...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...and then they know how American they are.

Rachel may represent a smaller percentage of the community in that she is formally educated in Italian studies and has lived in and traveled throughout Italy over the course of her whole life. Surely, this could have influenced her attitude towards people who she believes are displaying a real "ignorance" regarding the ethnic categories of Italian and Italian American. For someone who cannot tolerate this lack of accuracy, she clearly refers to herself as Italian though she is of Sicilian descent. For most, this may not seem hypocritical or contradictory since common knowledge suggests that this distinction is no longer important. Though she is well aware of the fact that there is a difference between Italian and Sicilian, the consequence of being an Italian or Italian America remains invested with social status and power in a way that being a Sicilian is not. In the next excerpt from our interview, Rachel recalls an experience that demonstrates what it was like for her to be an Italian American in 1960s North Louisiana.

Rachel: You know, and they, it seemed like the Anglo-Saxon kids, you know, just the Smiths and Joneses, it was like they considered themselves just devoid of any culture and

they loved coming over and eating with us 'cause we had this culture, you know. Not just food, just...you know, they probably noticed it more than we did.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: Just something about our interactions, they just thought that we were so exotic, you know, and that we had this culture that they just gravitated towards.

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: You know, today and I mean, my god, it just seems like when you say you're Italian American, I mean, I think you're really revered.

Italian American subjectivity, informed by an American ideological view of Italian ethnicity, continues to draw on ideas and values that reach back over a century ago. Perhaps it is for this reason that we have left behind the Sicilian identity, an identity that has resulted in ostracization. Not only has this ethnic history been covered up by a period of American assimilation that emphasized national allegiance over ethnic pride, but it has yet to be recovered and disseminated through popular discursive avenues.

As I have shown, the racial categorization of Sicilians both in Italy and America remains an important issue for understanding the process of racialization immigrant populations went through as they became a permanent fixture in American society. When I spoke with members of the community who were of the later generations of Sicilian Americans regarding discrimination, for many the conflict was due to the cultural differences between "Italians" and "Anglo Saxons". Father Siragusa, a priest at one of the Catholic churches in what is now known as "Old Bossier", claimed that it was the "the good ole boy network, the indigenous Anglo population" that refused to give jobs to Sicilian immigrants. Rachel was another participant who emphasized culture rather than race when commenting on how poorly Sicilians were treated by whites in the turn of the century Louisiana.

Rachel: If you ever watch any of those Merchant Ivory movies like *Room With A View* and *On the Wings of the Dove*...or was it *Where Angels Fear to Tread*...Um, those movies were always about how the Brits were so fascinated with Italy. You know,

it's like on the one hand they'd say, "Those Italians!" (laughs) You know, they couldn't believe how they were so passionate and physical and all these things, but still they couldn't stay away! The Brits, you know, they always wanted to go to Italy and I think when the Italians came over here, I mean, I think everything about their culture was so foreign to the Anglo Saxon people who were already here. You know, besides the fact that, you know, I mean poor things, they were illiterate and, uh...

Jamie: Yeah.

Rachel: ...you know, they were, I mean if you watch the movie *The Golden Door*, these people, I mean they were just dirty, they just, uh...you know, they were not very refined people at all, you know.

Again, Rachel replicates the discursive regimes of the early 20th century that described Sicilians and their culture as a product of a more "primitive" society. By emphasizing their cultural differences, Rachel avoids the fact that Sicilians were dehumanized due to their perceived genetic inferiority. Even if not in a racially informed analysis, she does recognize that discrimination existed, as the following excerpt shows.

Rachel: With the Anglo-Saxons and dealing with discrimination and everybody worked hard and had their children work...

Roediger argues that by the 1960s most Italians in America had firmly adopted a white identity (Roediger 2003: 263). It would make sense then that someone who grew up during this period would have a difficult time making sense of white on white racial discrimination. In addition to her comments on Anglo Saxon culture as the root of Italian discrimination, she touches on the notion of hard work as a mechanism for distancing themselves from Black communities that are viewed by white America as unemployable, lazy, or content in living off of government assistance.

On the contrary, many interviewees of the older generations had no reservations in comparing the way Sicilians were treated to the way Louisianians treated African Americans. With very little prompting, Joseph recalled what it was like for him growing up on a farm in South Louisiana.

Joseph: And my grandpaw, and then my momma and my daddy, they could talk it too. But when we started school, they wanted, you know... we was kind of like the blacks are, you know what I mean?

Jamie: Yeah.

Joseph: Italians was always downgraded, you know.

In another interview that took place days later, Joseph reiterated this to me:

Joseph: Yeah, and they kind of took Italians like the blacks today.

The fact that Italians were treated similarly to how Black people were treated is a well-documented phenomenon. However, trying to negotiate a racial identity that has been this fluid can produce complicated and sometimes contradictory statements.

This is documented in a statement from the conversation I had with Anthony about how Sicilians Americans were treated in Shreveport/Bossier City during the 1940s and 1950s.

Anthony: Yeah...Well, little Vince'll tell you something but now I'll tell you what the truth is. Italians wasn't but one step....in fact lower ...about even with Blacks.

Again, when discussing the history of the Sicilian community, Anthony had this to say:

Anthony: That was just their way of life and it still is as far as that goes. But it's all right now, I mean, they don't say much to you no more, being as all of the blacks and Hispanics have moved in, you know, they kind of look over it. But you can believe what I'm telling you, baby, you're still not but three from the bottom....

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: ...with a redneck. And I call a redneck an American. It's still three from the bottom!

Jamie: Yeah, I guess I never thought about it. You know, the people I've talked to have said quite a bit about the discrimination that Italians had to go through with whites...

Anthony: Sure did. I'm goin' to tell you, baby, they ain't but one step ahead of a nigger. Italian people wasn't.

Firstly, it is interesting to see how Anthony tries to negotiate Sicilian Americans' racial position in Louisiana during the early to mid 20th century. At different points while trying to settle on what he considers to be an accurate description, he says Italians are "one step below", then "even lower", and finally "about even" with Black people.

Anthony also uses the terms "redneck" and "American" interchangeably, highlighting the fact that "American" and "white" were synonymous. His final statement contradicts his previous claims by stating that Italians weren't "but one step ahead of a nigger." Perhaps Anthony realized that he wasn't comfortable with the idea that Italians were worse than "niggers" and rectified this by making them "one step ahead" rather than "one step below", as they were when he referred to them as "blacks." If Sicilians had begun to adopt a white racist ideology in response to being racially discriminated against, Anthony's use of the epithet "nigger" would appear to serve as evidence.

Further evidence of adopting views that draw on old racist Discourses when Anthony recalls an event that happened the summer prior to my stay. News outlets reported the tragic death of six teenagers from two Black families who had gone swimming in the Red River and drowned. This was Anthony's take on the event:

Anthony: Them little children, black kids, that drowned on the Red River.

Secretary: Uh-huh.

Anthony: Was six of 'em, wasn't it?

Secretary: Yep.

Jamie: Wow.

Anthony: Well, they blamed that...really, I'm not going to say "blamed it", but really I interpreted it as blamin' it.... They blamed it on the white people, the white race because when the kids were younger they ain't had no private swimmin' pool to learn in.

Jamie: So, they didn't know how to swim?

Anthony: So, they all got down there and got fidgety and they all drowned in the river. But they was in the worst part of the river.

Jamie: Hmm.

Anthony: And I tried to tell the people, black people don't swim like that. They don't want to swim period, anyhow. You ever notice that?

Jamie: No.

Anthony: Now you watch, there aren't too many black people who swim for the simple reason in the old country, which was Africa...

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: Or South America, wherever, they all got parasites in the water. The white man didn't swim down there, not even Tarzan....

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony:....swim in that kind of water. 'Cause they'd generate...and get parasites in their system and that would be the end of 'em.

Jamie: Hmm.

Anthony: People say, "Well, where did they bathe?" Well, they'd wait till like what we had yesterday. A deluge of rain that piled up, gathered up in a valley or a hole or a trench...and then they'd go swimmin'. Or go wash (pronounced warsh). 'Cause they don't swim.

Jamie: Hmm.

Anthony: You'll never see a show or nothin' where a black man in Africa goes swimmin'.

While Anthony's rather candid remarks establish the type of racist views that most people would be put-off by, the idea that Black people don't swim is obviously one that remains alive and well in popular discourse.

Since one of the reasons Sicilians were discriminated against pertained to the relationship they had with the Black community, Anthony distances Italians from African Americans in the following excerpt by referring to Italians as white for the first time in the interview. Anthony and I are discussing the family unit as a workforce when he made these comments.

Anthony: Well, it didn't take much...you gotta remember, they hired nobody.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: It was the wife, the daddy...uh, the man of the house, the wife, and two or three children and they'd all work in the stores. Except for the girls, now, they didn't work in the stores.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: They didn't want the...plain out, they just didn't want the white girls, young white girls... messin' around with niggers. 'Cause you know that that happens.

Jamie: Yeah.

Anthony: And it's happenin' today...frequently. I can't stand to watch t.v., goddamn it! They've got one on now where, uh....she's buyin' some bed clothin' or bed sheets. There's a goddamn nigger with her and he's standin' up on the side, she jumps in the bed to try the mattress out. She's doin' that.... (imitates someone jumpin' on a mattress)

(I laugh at his gesturing)

Anthony: ...and man, he done jumped in next to her!

Secretary: That commercial drives him crazy!

(I laugh again)

Jamie: I've never seen it.

Secretary: I want to say it's a Progressive Insurance commercial. She jumps in...she's in the bed with these guys and she tryin' out a mattress and then the guy comes and gets in there and he gets in his car and it's got the little Flo bobble head thingy on the dashboard.

Jamie: Yeah. Did you know of many Italians back then marrying black people?

Anthony: All of 'em. Do what?

Jamie: I said do you know of many Italians marrying black people...

Anthony's grandson: Never.

Jamie:... back in the day.

Secretary (at the same time as me): back in the day.

Anthony: I knew a bunch of 'em...I knew 'em all.

Jamie: Yeah?

Anthony: Every Italian in this...

Secretary (thinking he hasn't understood the question): Did you know of any Italian men or women that married black people?

Anthony: Not married, but went with 'em.

Jamie: Oh, okay.

Anthony: Went with 'em.

The fact that Anthony has such a strong aversion to a television commercial that implies sexual relations between a white woman and a black man may come from a time when the nation's physicians and politicians alike drew from pseudo-scientific research and religious discourse to condemn racial impurity. I can only imagine that he holds onto these beliefs so strongly due to the fact that many Italians "went with" African Americans.

Anthony's grandson's response to my question regarding Sicilian/African American relations illustrates how racism continues to be passed down through the

generations. His reply that the two groups “never” had relationships is anything but credible given the fact that he is a good bit younger than I am and therefore in no position to tell me how things were in the 1950s and 1960s. So what made him answer the question before his grandfather could with the absolute negative, “never?” Unfortunately, I didn’t stop the interview to ask him, though I wish now that I had. I can only guess that he said it because in his mind such a thing is incomprehensible and doesn’t make sense given the racist attitudes that prevailed among some Italian Americans. This is my guess because it is also my experience. I, too, was surprised at the number of interracial relationships that have existed and continue to exist between the Italian and African American communities.

In fact, I had only recently learned that there is an older relative of mine (same generation as Anthony) who had a long lasting affair with a Black woman, a relationship that resulted in several children. The story goes that this relative owned a grocery store and his mistress and their children would come in the store and stock up on groceries without paying and everyone knew why. I wish I could say that society has changed since the days of such intolerance regarding so-called mixed race relationships. But the sad truth is that his children who are now grown up and, in at least one case, in an interracial relationship, aren’t welcome to attend their own family reunions. While I tried to reach out to them during this research project to try to understand their identity as Italian Americans, I was quickly told that it may not be a good idea due to the sensitivity of the situation. So I respected that and decided not to contact them for the purposes of this project. I hope to speak with them one day.

Labels of the White Community

In addition to self-labels, racial and ethnic labels used to identify others are important for understanding how participants define themselves vis-à-vis other groups. We've already seen how some participants have used other ethnic groups, such as Mexicans and Jews, to contextualize their own experiences. In this section I would like to examine the labels applied to the dominant white society. Briefly, I would like to say something about my own use of labels during my conversations with the participants and in this section in particular.

During the interviews, I tried to mirror the labels and terms that the interviewees used themselves. But because of my strong interests in race I often began with the racial label "white" in my line of questioning regarding discrimination (I never used the term racism unless they did, as I didn't want people to be turned off or confused by the idea of being discriminated against because of their race). The precedent I set as the interviewer no doubt had an influence on the terminology used by the interviewees. I tried to be aware of this and if I noticed that an interviewee used "Anglo Saxon" or "American", I would use these labels in follow-up questions so as not to confuse them and also to connect with them on a discursive level in order to build rapport.

In the following section of the analysis the labels "American", "Anglo Saxon", "white", "redneck" and "good ole boy" all refer to the same population. For the sake of consistency and my own preference, I will be referring to this group mostly with the label "white". Additionally, I believe the labels "American" and "Anglo Saxon" to be inaccurate for various reasons. To refer to the white community only as "American" implies that the majority non-white population isn't American; to use "Anglo Saxon"

ignores the ethnic diversity among the white population, which today includes Italian Americans as well.

Rachel never used the term “white”. In the following excerpt she recounts the difficulties faced by the first immigrants without employing racial terms, even though at one point she does admit that there were biases based on skin color. Instead, this is how she chooses to frame the history of conflict between Italians and whites in Louisiana (the use of “their” in the following example refers to the Sicilian immigrants):

Rachel: With the Anglo-Saxons and dealing with discrimination and everybody worked hard and had their children work...

And then:

Rachel: I think everything about their culture was so foreign to the Anglo Saxon people who were already here.

Cultural differences, such as religious affiliation, certainly played a role in discriminatory practices. Rachel’s own stories of realizing as a young adolescent that she was different from her Baptist friends testify to this fact. But it remains undeniable that discrimination was at least in part motivated by and expressed through racial discourse. To ignore that aspect would be to misunderstand the nature of these hardships Sicilians suffered here in Louisiana, ultimately downplaying the tremendous role race has played in the ostracization of foreigners or immigrants during this period of American history. The only other participant to have studied the history of Sicilian immigration to America as Rachel had was Father Siragusa, who also preferred the label “Anglo Saxon” over racially defined labels. Emphasizing the cultural differences made the disputes between the two communities seem almost innocuous and natural, as if these things are expected

to happen. Framing it this way allows one to ignore the malicious nature of the movement to end Sicilian immigration in Louisiana.

Both Father Siragusa and Rachel draw on the discourse or “knowledge” produced and disseminated by official ethnic organizations that have greatly relegated racism and discrimination to the recesses of the history of Italians in America. As Rachel pointed out, the Sons of Italy organization does not wish to dwell on the hardships of the past, but instead wants to promote Italian culture while raising funds for charitable organizations. Furthermore, the rigidity of American race ideology hardly permits room for this concept of transitioning from non-white to white, from racial to ethnic. Though scholars may use terms like “middle man minority” or describe characteristics of an “inbetweenness”, those ideas hardly translate for people in the Bossier City community.

Another participant who preferred national labels rather than racial ones was Bob, who claimed to grow up with more friends in the white community than in the Sicilian community. Bob referred to the white community as “the Americans”. In the following, Bob responds to a question about his experiences with the white community of Bossier.

Bob: That’s the only Italian boys I knew. I knew just about all the American boys. I knew all the American boys. When I’s in school, they never called me and my brothers a slang name. They never called us a slang name. Not us three brothers.

The synonymous use of “American” and “white” harkens back to the racial laws that assessed who was deemed eligible to become a citizen of this country. Though he never explicitly said “white”, in the context of our conversation, I think it is safe to say Bob wasn’t referring to the African American community of Bossier City as a potentially threatening source of discrimination. His response demonstrates how all these years later “American” can still be used to index “white”.

Though Bob was aware that discrimination took place, he denied having ever experienced it himself. Impressive, coming from the son of an immigrant and the oldest participant I interviewed. On the contrary, my second eldest contributor had plenty to say with reference to experiencing discrimination. Although he spoke almost immediately in racial terms when talking about the white community in some contexts, in others he chose to use either the pejorative “redneck” or “American”. Case in point, Anthony talks about his experiences with discrimination in terms of dealing with “rednecks” or “Americans”, never in racial terms. In his description of an encounter with an Italian American state politician who he essentially called a traitor to his own people, Anthony told him, “ All you do is love these goddamn rednecks.” In this context of experiencing discrimination, the instigators were described in nonracial terms. However, this was not the case when discussing those who discriminate against others. In the following, “they” refers to Black people.

Anthony: They didn’t give the white people much problems. They stayed away from ‘em. But the Italians and the black didn’t intermingle, but they respected one another.

Juxtaposing the following two excerpts also demonstrates his use of racial terms to distinguish between the white population and the Italian population:

Anthony: ...black people segregated themselves. I don’t give a damn who you were, they didn’t want to be near no white person.

...and...

Anthony: Let me tell you, black people like Italians.

In both excerpts, Anthony is talking about the relationship between the three communities at hand. In this particular case, he distinguishes between Italians and whites, even though in other contexts (i.e. regarding Italian families not wanting their daughters

to work in the family store) he obviously defines Italians as white. Affiliation with a white identity shifts according to the context and what is being indexed. In the case of whiteness indexing discrimination and racism, Anthony may be differentiating between Italians and whites in order to absolve them of the numerous and notorious wrongdoings that whites have committed against Black people throughout the history of northwest Louisiana. In other cases, Anthony assumes a white identity for himself and all Italian Americans by suggesting that they should not date or marry a Black person because of their racial status.

Another participant who differentiated between whites and Italians, Debby had this to say when talking about race relations in Bossier:

Debby: I mean everybody's kind of got some racisms toward one thing or the other, but I mean as far as being able to live in harmony, you didn't see that, you know...

Jamie: Divide?

Debby: Yeah, like you see with the black and white, with the black and Italians.

Corroborating what many scholars of Italian American studies in Louisiana have declared for a while now, Debby asserts that the Italian community was more compassionate than the white community when it came to issues of race. Yet, instead of drawing on these historical accounts or scholarly discourses, Debby is speaking from her own experiences. The two above examples of discourse on race may appear confusing at first since in most people's eyes Italians *are* whites. Yet in this context, white racism is a significant part of how whiteness is defined. Though distinguishing between whites and Italian Americans on the basis of racism might imply that Italian Americans are not racist, we have seen that this is not the case.

Perhaps less offensive than “redneck”, Father Siragusa used the phrase “good ole boy” in reference to the white community of Bossier City. In the context of the conversation, he was describing the cronyism that often prevented Sicilian immigrants and their Italian American progeny from being hired by those with the power to hand out jobs. Although sometimes read in a positive light, one could argue that the attributes indexed by “good ole boy” in this context could be interpreted as parochial at best and ethically corrupt at worst. Even so, I do not believe that Father Siragusa used that phrase with the intent to belittle the white community.

Another thing that struck me during my interview with Father Siragusa was his use of the adjective “indigenous”, which he ascribed to the white population that was here prior to the arrival of the Sicilian immigrants. Besides the fact that any legitimately indigenous peoples were forced out way before the first Sicilian colonies grew up around the Shreveport area, I couldn’t help but get the impression that when Father Siragusa (and Rachel) spoke about the people who “were already here” that they were specifically talking about the white population. Given the historical demographics of the area, the black population that played (and in many ways continues to play) a significant role in the socio-economic and cultural landscape in which the Italian population has now thrived were not what the participants had in mind. Usually, they followed this phrase with the qualifiers “American” and “Anglo Saxon”.

Those individuals who were more inclined to use racial labels to describe the white community either had experience with racism first hand or were making it a point to distance themselves from those who use white racism to discriminate against others. Those with college educations appeared more likely to use labels of cultural significance,

such as “Anglo Saxon” or “American”, which drew attention away from the racial causes of white prejudice against Italians. Participants of varied educational and generational backgrounds used terms like “redneck” and “good ole boy”, each of which indexes characteristics that can be either derogatory or playful, depending on the context. Either way, the terms serve to put distance between the two groups, culturally speaking. The alternative, using racial terminology to differentiate between white people and Italian Americans, can lead to confusing contradictions for those trying to discuss Italian American identity.

One last label used to describe the non-Italian population is “Menigana”. Growing up, I heard this word used over and over for people who were not Italian, or as my father jokingly puts it, for those who only wish they were Italian. It wasn’t until Rachel used this term during one of our conversations that it clicked: “Menigana” is Sicilian for “Americana”, which is the Italian term for American. Rachel used it when discussing the traditional Sicilian cuisine.

Rachel: ‘Cause somebody was saying, “Oh, you got to put the finocchio seeds in it!” I said, “That’s just another thing (starts to laugh), I mean, if you’re just totally ‘Menigana, to give you, like, fava beans with finocchio seeds you’re just probably not gonna go for it!

The use of food as an ethnic symbol, compounded with the use of the term “Menigana,” re-enforces the ethnic boundaries between Sicilian Americans and Americans. The fact that most of the people I spoke with are likely familiar with this term even though they can no longer speak Sicilian suggests that this term continues to be an important marker of ethnic affiliation and pride.

CONCLUSION

The previous chapter illustrated how different ethnic and racial labels often index certain values, beliefs or ideological aspects of identity, whether intentionally or unintentionally. In many cases, differences in label use were split along generational lines, thus depicting an evolution in the construction of identities. For instance, the use of the racial term “white” was almost exclusively used by the older generations while the younger generations, with the exception of one, never used racialized terminology when recounting discrimination (historically or within a personal retelling of an experience). The older generation still remembers a time when Italians were treated like they were “three from the bottom,” on the racial hierarchy and these experiences continue to inform how which labels are used to construct their identity. Conversely, the younger generation generally grew up during the initial Discourse on the Italian American identity that accompanied the first ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s, an identity that wasn’t at odds with a white, American identity. Therefore, while they may have experiences with discrimination it is often interpreted as religiously or culturally based.

Members from all generations used the term “white” when talking about non-Italian Americans when the discussion involved acts of white racism, seemingly putting some distance between their Italian American identity and a white identity. This would certainly seem to complicate what it means to be “white” since most of the people who used the label to describe others this way would themselves self-identify as white. In these cases, it may be that white is used to index a type of behavior rather than an actual racial affiliation.

At other times, a few participants mimicked the very behavior they condemned. By drawing on old white racist Discourses by using racial epithets as labels or showing a genuine hatred for interracial relationships, it was obvious that Italian Americans are not immune to this type of overt, abrasive racism. Even the notion that Italians are of a lesser white racial status, as the *White Trash Cookbook* might suggest, adopts the same discursive regimes that reject the lives of non-whites as equally valuable. The fact that Italian Americans in Bossier now have the agency to situate themselves as either white or non-white is indicative of their privileged position within American society.

Ethnic identity, influenced by racial identity, has evolved over the generations as well. The pan-ethnic Italian American label, one that draws largely on American Discourses of white ethnic pride and the celebration of “high Italian culture,” can perpetuate the old idea that Sicilian immigrants were from a cultural heritage that isn’t worth appreciating (or even remembering for that matter). It would seem as if the label “Sicilian American”, though some scholars are attempting to revive it in an effort to recognize this great culture and it’s people, never really stood a chance due to the Discourse that viewed it as inferior, racially “other” and dangerous.

This continued ambiguity regarding racial identity can make discussing racism confusing and problematic since this history of discrimination is often interpreted as a cultural issue rather than a racial issue (Anglo Saxons vs Italian). Episodes of white aggression can be translated into racial, ethnic, and religious conflict, depending on the knowledge and experience of the speaker. Additionally, the internalization of racist Discourses may function to distance oneself from the non-white identity or category in which Sicilians were once placed.

Discourse on the Melting Pot theory, a theory popularized in mainstream culture, surfaced as several participants expressed their beliefs that assimilation was an inescapable fact. Undeniably, social patterns involving inter-marriage, religious practices, and the loss of language have all contributed to the process of assimilation. Although Sicilian ethnicity has transformed into an Italian American identity over time, people still identify strongly with some form of their Sicilian ethnic heritage. Even so, social clubs and academics, both cultivated in a dominant white culture, continue to shape the agendas and expression of ethnic heritage for the Italian American community as a whole. Many have a desire to reconnect with the culture of their parents or grandparents, so much so that they are willing to travel to places of cultural significance and, in some cases, all the way back to Sicily. Both the older and younger generations remain interested in preserving the community's culture, whatever form that celebration takes.

The story of the Italian American community in the mostly white, Protestant, Conservative Republican Bossier City represents an important episode unique in Louisiana history. From this history, we can gain insight into the processes that shape the evolution of race and ethnicity in other American contexts. Given the growing Hispanic community of north Louisiana, these issues are just as relevant today as they were one hundred years ago. It is inevitable that change takes place, but it may be possible to do so while preventing assimilation into America's white racist ideologies. This study has shown how ethnic and racial labels are adopted for various reasons and used in a number of ways that ultimately rely on the historical context and experiences in which they were

formed. This context includes the discursive regimes that create and inform each and every one of our social identities.

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APPENDIX

Application for Exemption from Institutional Oversight

LSU
 Institutional Review Board
 Dr. Robert Mathews, Chair
 131 David Boyd Hall
 Baton Rouge, LA 70803
 P: 225.578.8692
 F: 225.578.6792
 irb@lsu.edu
 lsu.edu/irb

Unless qualified as meeting the specific criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight, ALL LSU research/ projects using living humans as subjects, or samples, or data obtained from humans, directly or indirectly, with or without their consent, must be approved or exempted in advance by the LSU IRB. This Form helps the PI determine if a project may be exempted, and is used to request an exemption.

– Applicant, Please fill out the application in its entirety and include the completed application as well as parts A-E, listed below, when submitting to the IRB. Once the application is completed, please submit two copies of the completed application to the IRB Office or to a member of the Human Subjects Screening Committee. Members of this committee can be found at <http://www.lsu.edu/screeningmembers.shtml>

- A Complete Application Includes All of the Following:
 - (A) Two copies of this completed form and two copies of part B thru E.
 - (B) A brief project description (adequate to evaluate risks to subjects and to explain your responses to Parts 1&2)
 - (C) Copies of all instruments to be used.
 - *If this proposal is part of a grant proposal, include a copy of the proposal and all recruitment material.
 - (D) The consent form that you will use in the study (see part 3 for more information.)
 - (E) Certificate of Completion of Human Subjects Protection Training for all personnel involved in the project, including students who are involved with testing or handling data, unless already on file with the IRB. Training link: (<http://php.nihtaining.com/users/login.php>.)
 - (F) IRB Security of Data Agreement: (<http://www.lsu.edu/irb/IRB%20Security%20of%20Data.pdf>)

1) Principal Investigator: Rank:
 Dept: Ph: E-mail:

2) Co Investigator(s): please include department, rank, phone and e-mail for each

IRB#	ESSDS	LSU Proposal #
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Complete Application	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Human Subjects Training	

3) Project Title:

Study Exempted By:
 Dr. Robert C. Mathews, Chairman
 Institutional Review Board
 Louisiana State University
 203 B-1 David Boyd Hall
 225-578-8692 | www.lsu.edu/irb
 Exemption Expires: 5-16-2014

4) Proposal? (yes or no) If Yes, LSU Proposal Number
 Also, if YES, either This application completely matches the scope of work in the grant
 OR More IRB Applications will be filed later

5) Subject pool (e.g. Psychology students)
 *Circle any "vulnerable populations" to be used: (children <18; the mentally impaired, pregnant women, the aged, other). Projects with incarcerated persons cannot be exempted.

6) PI Signature Date (no per signatures)

** I certify my responses are accurate and complete. If the project scope or design is later changes, I will resubmit for review. I will obtain written approval from the Authorized Representative of all non-LSU institutions in which the study is conducted. I also understand that it is my responsibility to maintain copies of all consent forms at LSU for three years after completion of the study. If I leave LSU before that time the consent forms should be preserved in the Departmental Office.

Screening Committee Action: Exempted Not Exempted Category/Paragraph 2

Reviewer Mathews Signature Robert Mathews Date 5/17/11

VITA

Jamie Digilormo is from the small town of Sulphur, Louisiana. She has lived in the Baton Rouge area for most of her life and attended LSU for her Bachelor's degree in Anthropology. Her academic interests include Critical Race Studies, Italian Cinema, and Linguistics. She has studied abroad in Italy on two occasions and volunteered at the River Road Museum in Donaldsonville. Her hobbies include traveling, riding motorcycles, playing music and painting. Jamie was married to Jason Spring in October 2008.

