

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“ITALIANS AGAINST RACISM”  
The Murder of Yusuf Hawkins (R. I. P.)  
and My March on Bensonhurst

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The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.  
—Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you.  
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road*

There I was, a typical New Yorker, alone in the crowd. I was standing in the streets of Bensonhurst on August 27, 1989, four days after a group of some thirty men, predominantly Italian American, accosted four African American youths looking to buy a used car and fatally shot seventeen-year-old Yusuf Hawkins on Bay Ridge Avenue. I traveled from northern Brooklyn to denounce and express my outrage, along with others, at this violent act of racial hatred. I took part in this organized demonstration as an Italian American, informed by a sense of *italianità* that consciously stood in opposition to ethnic chauvinism and racial violence. Although I couldn't think of another *paisan* I could ask to join me in the black-led march through the streets of Bensonhurst, I carried a handmade, poster board sign that read

ITALIANS AGAINST RACISM. My use of the plural was a simple expression of hope.

The day before marching in Bensonhurst, I watched in disgust and with profound sadness the televised images of neighborhood residents staging a shameful spectacle of overt racism in response to the first of many demonstrations. It was a blatant exhibition of xenophobia in defense of parochial village values.

I was also deeply distressed by the excruciating silence emanating from the self-proclaimed leaders of the Italian American community. The city witnessed the utter lack of leadership as cautious politicians, out-of-touch academics, and aloof *prominenti* were invisible and ultimately ineffective in participating in the public discourse surrounding the unfolding events. I desperately searched for, but did not find, an Italian American of public stature who stepped forward in those early tense days to make an unequivocal repudiation of racism and violence, and to speak out against its manifestation in Bensonhurst among the Italian community. A clear and authoritative Italian American voice was absent from the public sphere where the city's citizens could turn for understanding, resolution, and healing. The so-called leadership was struck by deep denial and paralysis.

The demonstrators met at the murder site—Bay Ridge Avenue and the corner of 20th Avenue—for a prayer service. We then marched up 20th Avenue toward St. Dominic's Roman Catholic Church, five blocks away. That was when things started to heat up. The sidewalks on either side of the avenue were packed with white men and women, young and middle-aged, jeering, laughing derisively, and screaming insults at us from behind wood barricades and the line of police officers. One newspaper estimated there were 100 marchers, 400 counterdemonstrators, and 250 cops. “Fuck you, niggers!” “Niggers go home!” The tirade was incessant. Faces were flushed red with rage; I could see the veins bulging on men's necks. People held up watermelons to taunt the African American protestors, and waved Italian and American flags in some perverse expression of ethnic pride and patriotism. It was a grotesque performance of collective hate from my community, folks I had grown up with and documented as part of scholarly research on Italian New York.

I watched with trepidation as clusters of young men followed us, hugging the storefronts as they scrambled behind the crowd of counterdemonstrators. Where were they going? What were they up to? At one point, a loud explosion rang out, startling us in the street as we flinched in unison in fear of a gun. Someone had tossed a firecracker into the marchers. Young women with their boyfriends laughed from behind the barricades.

My sign and whiteness in the midst of the predominantly black demonstrators got the attention of the Italians lining the sidewalk. People pointed in my direction, laughing, cursing, spitting. Some clearly thought it was a ludicrous proposition: Italians against racism. Others were incensed. My cardboard placard called into question the popular notion that joined Italian American identity and racial hatred in some natural and essentialist union. I was a race traitor, the internal threat to the prevailing local rhetoric.

The taunts and tension increased when we stopped at the church steps to hear a series of speakers. To the left of the church, a group of men screamed repeatedly in my direction. One man—middle-aged, mustached, and balding—whose photograph was reproduced months later in *Harper's Magazine*, directed his malice at me, screaming "Fuck you!" and spitting out the ultimate Italian curse, "*Sfacimm!*" (sperm of the devil). I screamed back "racist" and "*razzista di merda*," with a mix of anger and fear. I pulled my verbal punches, afraid to incite their anger and provoke retaliation later when I would make my way to the subway alone. One guy screamed that he was "going to get" me.

At one moment, a young woman stepped from the crowd and headed right toward me. Oh, shit, I thought. This is it. Here was this woman, I imagined, so angry with me and my sign that she would leave the safety of the crowd and plunge into a group of black demonstrators in an attempt to punch me. And I knew that if she swung, all hell was going to break loose. How the hell did I get here?

### THE PATH TO BENSONHURST

Born and raised in the Flatlands section of Brooklyn, my family had intimate ties to Bensonhurst and the surrounding southern Brooklyn neighborhoods of Gravesend, Dyker Heights, and Bay Ridge. It was where my parents bought the orthopedic shoes we kids hated, and discovered as adults we never really needed, where we shopped for Italian food products along Avenue U and under the elevated subway tracks along 86th Street. It was where my mother's *paesani* and our *compari* Gianni and Levia Liberace lived, almost exclusively in their wood-paneled basement.

My parents, while born in New York in the 1920s, were raised in Italy and returned to the city as adults in the early 1950s. My mother, Anna Anniballe, who joined her siblings in New York after World War II, worked in the downtown Brooklyn needle trades before getting married. She displayed the tough and feisty anti-authoritarianism associated with southern

Italy's laboring poor. I remember her storming the Catholic school I attended from first to fourth grades to berate the feared Irish nuns about corporal punishment. "Don't you ever lay a hand on my child," she'd warn them. (That was *her* job.) When I was a kid, she would answer back a cop without hesitation. The notion that you should fight for what you think is right has been my mother's greatest legacy to me.

While my mom only completed the compulsory fifth grade in Italy, my father, Enrico, graduated from the University of Naples as a veterinarian and worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture for forty years. My dad is the family historian, keeping us connected to our past, to our Italian relatives, and to the American branches of both sides of the family. It is my dad who diligently engages in the "work of kinship," what anthropologist Micaela di Leonardo noted was the domain of Italian American women.<sup>1</sup> His repertoire of stories, which he has told repeatedly for decades, include the Nazi occupation of his hometown, the trials of war-ravaged Italy, and his first impressions of the United States. He would recount how second-generation, working-class Italian Americans treated him dismissively, a dumb greenhorn with an accent, unable to accept a literate and university-educated immigrant. During the 1960s, with the increase in black militancy, my dad told us of his shock at seeing racially segregated public facilities while working in slaughterhouses and meatpacking plants in the South during the 1950s. Once, he absentmindedly drank out of the black-designated water fountain at a meatpacking plant in Florida, and was quickly reminded of the Jim Crow laws by his white colleagues. These stories were told as an expression of empathy set against the background of the civil rights movement. Growing up under my parents' roof, I never heard them hurl the word "nigger" as a racial epithet.

This is not to say my parents were not burdened by racism. I remember distinctly my mother yelling at us kids about her "working like a nigger" when she became frustrated with domestic chores and our lack of support. Her angry outbursts stemmed from her aggravation with working so hard as a housewife doing demanding, invisible, and thankless labor coded by gender and often race, work commonly reserved for a black maid.<sup>2</sup> My father's racism, on the other hand, flipped the race and labor pairing by occasionally spouting pseudoscientific postulations attributing blacks' ascribed laziness to their proximity to the sun, racial theories learned in the Italian fascist school system. When I countered that his hypothesis would suggest that Italians living in the Mezzogiorno (The Land of the Midday Sun) would be prime candidates for similar slothful attributes, and that Anglos had historically attrib-

uted such traits to southern Italians, he found himself at a loss for words. Ultimately, we were not immune to racism's repugnant effects.

By my early twenties, I had come to understand that the first two decades of my life were defined by a sense of outsiderhood. The block where we lived, Coyle Street, was white Catholic: Italian, Irish, and some German. My earliest memories were of being a skinny five-year-old (my mother worried I had tuberculosis) and being beaten up by kids on the block. These repeated encounters were informed by our "foreign" status, my parents' accent, my use of Italian, and, I am convinced to this day, the elegant Italian wool knit outfits my mother dressed me in. (I didn't own a pair of jeans or sneakers until I was in my mid-teens). On a block lined with Italian American families, I was known as the "spaghetti bender," a term I never understood. (You don't *hend* spaghetti! You twirl it.) I still remember the day I came home from school and told my mother that I would no longer speak Italian. Only English!

My dad was transferred to Connecticut when I was ten. We moved to recently suburbanized farmland in the town of Wethersfield. As an adult, I would tell people that the town's high points included George Washington having slept there and Malcolm X getting a speeding ticket, which he mentioned in his autobiography. Here again the sense of being the Other—this time an Italian New Yorker, the city kid in the suburbs—continued. My mom reinforced this feeling with her growing nostalgia for Brooklyn. She longed for the conviviality of stoop culture and urban life, and dismissed her neighbors as "cold Yankees," despite the fact that many of them were Italian Americans who had recently moved from the "slums" of Hartford. I internalized my mother's cultural dislocation by viewing the suburbs as an antiseptic wasteland and New York as the golden land of freedom and opportunity where civilization thrived right outside one's doorstep.

Although we spent numerous weekends in New York during our five-year hiatus, nothing prepared me for the return to Brooklyn. In September 1970, at the age of fifteen, I entered the newly constructed, "state of the art" South Shore High School, and within weeks the school erupted into a full-blown "race riot." Welcome to New York. Sitting on the edge of the Canarsie neighborhood, South Shore was caught up in the tension surrounding school busing and changing demographics documented by sociologist Jonathan Rieder years later.<sup>3</sup> Police were called in to patrol the corridors. After the climate calmed down, another "riot" closed the academic year.

High school was a culturally schizophrenic experience. Students were divided by ethnicity and race, and sometimes even subdivided by class affili-

ations and cultural affinities. Initially, I found myself hanging out with one set of friends in school and with another group in the neighborhood. In my first year, I joined forces with Darlene Love, a turbaned African American girl, in a successful petition to oust a senile tenth grade math teacher. She and others soon educated me on the racial politics of the New York City school system—Brooklyn's invisible Berlin Wall rose at 3 P.M. dismissal as black, Latino, and white kids returned to their respective communities. What did I know? I was just some rube returning from the distant white suburbs. After school, I hung out with mostly Italian Americans and some Irish neighborhood kids. In those days, they were referred to as "hitters," and the girls were tougher than me. (Their cultural heirs would be known as *cugines*, from the Italian word for cousins, *cugini*, and eventually, *guidos*.) I remember one day hanging out on the corner in our perpetual attempt to escape boredom, when someone suggested we travel the distance of two bus rides to South Shore just to "beat up some niggers." Jesus Christ! I wasn't interested in starting a fight with total strangers! I decided then and there that this was not my crowd.

I soon found myself gravitating toward Jewish kids. My path did not follow the now classic trope of the Italian American from a book-hating family seeking friendship with the "people of the book" for intellectual stimulation and freedom. Our mutual interests were sex, drugs, and rock and roll. I ended up hanging out with two distinct groups of Jews who were identified as "JAPS" (Jewish American Princesses) and "freaks," respectively, with the former favoring expensive clothes and Quaaludes, and the long-haired latter favoring thrift shop apparel and reefer. Speed seemed to bridge the cultural divide. JAPS tended to side with Italian Americans in their fear and hatred of blacks and Puerto Ricans, with some of the males qualifying as bona fide hitters, while the latter were politically liberal, despite that fact that there weren't any blacks or Puerto Ricans in our group.

After surviving high school, I attended Brooklyn College, where I fell in with Puerto Ricans (I discovered salsa music in 1973—*¡Eddie Palmieri es Dios!*) and became involved with a group of political activists in the struggle to save free tuition at the City University of New York. As I soon discovered, this fight was part of a larger agenda for the leadership of the campus-based activists. The Brooklyn College organizers involved members of the Puerto Rican Revolutionary Workers Organization (PRRWO), a group that evolved out of the Young Lords Party. PRRWO members were adherents of "Marxist-Leninist-Maoist thought" and were actively engaged in forming a new American Communist Party. We met in "cells" to read and discuss polit-

ical tracts ranging from Lenin's *What Is to be Done?* to the Filipino Communist Party's position on "principled" relationships between "revolutionary couples." The movement even had its own cultural contingent in the guise of an a cappella group dubbed the Socialistics. One of their songs began, "The world's in great disorder and that's a good, good thing, because the people all over the world are fighting, are fighting to be free. Yes, they're fighting to be free."

I was dubbed "Serpico" (a nickname I wore with great honor) because of my ethnicity, and long hair and beard, and because of people playfully acknowledging their fear that I just might be an undercover cop. As part of the group's political maneuvering, I was asked to "infiltrate" the two Italian student clubs on campus and assess their receptivity to "coalition building." One club consisted of American-born, English-speaking students who were interested primarily in social gatherings, although the president at the time publicly expressed his support for free tuition. The other group was an informal gathering of immigrant and Italian-speaking students whose main preoccupation centered around eating lunch in the faculty dining room in close proximity to the Italian language professors. The two never met or socialized. At the time, I had no interest in either of them. I was comfortable hanging out with Latinos, with their racial diversity, concern with social issues, and passion for dancing.

The radicals soon started hurling dangerous accusations around campus as sectarian politics heated up. People were publicly denounced and vilified as "opportunists," "reactionaries," "lackeys of the bourgeoisie," and "Trotskyites" in some Brooklyn version of the Stalinist purges and the Chinese Cultural Revolution combined. These accusations often had a threatening street quality to them. One woman (in fact, the biracial daughter of an Italian American father and an African American mother) had her apartment ransacked with only her infant twins' clothes stolen. The message of this intimidating act was clear to all of us. She immediately left the city with her children for the safety of her mother's home in Virginia. My girlfriend at the time was on the short list of "class traitors" and feared that she would soon be attacked. My turn came when a close friend and "comrade" ratted me out to the leadership for making some disparaging remarks the likes of which I can't remember today. It was time to get off campus and maybe out of the city before I was sent off to the gulag or worse.<sup>4</sup>

My Italian cousin Raffaele saved me by arriving in the summer of 1976 with the idea of driving cross-country à la Jack Kerouac. I quit my summer job in a bookstore and headed west in a banged-up "drive away" car. I

dropped out of college when I returned to New York and got a job washing pots at a neighborhood Italian restaurant. I didn't have much to lose when first Raffaele, and then a woman from Milan I had met in San Francisco, invited me to Italy.

During 1977, I lived in Bologna and Milan, creating new friendships and getting to know my Italian relatives. It was a time of radical politics that included right-wing and left-wing terrorism. The Italians dubbed it *gli anni di piombo*, the bullet years. It was only later that I fully understood that I had lived through a remarkable historic moment. I participated in many of the defining political activities of the period: endless political debates with friends and family; broadcasts from the pirate "free" radio station Radio Alice (once a group of feminists took over the station, kicking Raffaele and me out of the broadcast booth while we were on the air); the occupation of the University of Bologna; ultra-Left demonstrations; the student protest against the police killing of Francesco Lo Russo under Bologna's Communist-controlled government that brought the city to a standstill; and the subsequent national youth conference in that city.<sup>5</sup> For a twenty-two-year-old, it was a life-defining experience.

A personal tragedy hit my family while I was living in Italy. Angelo Treglia, my mother's *paisan* and family friend, was shot dead by a neighbor. They had been arguing over a sidewalk paving job the neighbor had botched. The killing of this forty-two-year-old plumber in Brooklyn's Gravesend section made the headlines of the city's tabloids for several days in late October. It was not just the murder that was news. Over fifty people witnessed the shooting, yet not a single one came forward to talk to the police about what they saw. When the four shots rang out, kids were playing in the streets, people were washing their cars and gardening in their front yards, and a wedding party had assembled outside. John Kifner of the *New York Times* wrote: "On the street, people looked away when asked by a stranger if they had seen the shooting. No, they said, they were inside, out shopping, in the backyard, in Queens on a job."<sup>6</sup> Only after Italian-speaking detectives initiated an intensive outreach campaign did witnesses break their *omertà*, the code of silence in operation even for this non-mob-related murder. In Italy, I encountered this principle in the (stereo)typical response witnesses to mafia killings in Sicily reportedly gave investigating police: "*Io non c'ero e se c'ero dormivo. E se dormivo, sognavo di non esserci.*" ("I wasn't there and if I was, I was sleeping. And if I was sleeping, I was dreaming about not being there.") After Yusuf's death, an unidentified "Bensonhurst teenager" was quoted as saying, "I didn't see nothing, and even if I did see something, I didn't see nothing."<sup>7</sup>

I found this silencing, this loss of voice, in the face of criminality and injustice deeply disturbing and debilitating.

The erasure of grassroots voices would also become a theme when I returned to the States to study anthropology and art history at Brooklyn College. I found the anthropology teachers' perspective antiquated, as we read ethnographies of dark-skinned Others living long ago and in remote places at the expense of learning about their contemporary descendents. I told one professor that I wanted to study Brooklyn. Pointing out the window, I proclaimed, "Brooklyn's the most tribal place in the world!" The art department was intellectually exciting but it tended to decontextualize non-Western art, my area of interest, reducing the creative process to exotic objects on a museum wall. I wanted to know about living people whose art I could experience directly. In my last year of study, I met a group of scholars trained as folklorists who were documenting the artistic expressions of everyday people in New York and throughout the country. I went on to conduct fieldwork and write about the vernacular cultural expressions of Italian Americans, as well as other communities. After two decades of ethnographic writing, this essay is my first attempt at memoir.

The art of "participant observation," the staple of anthropological fieldwork, involved long-term and sometimes intense relationships with people who invited me into their homes, their social clubs, their churches. I liked the people I met. I had a sense of being part of a community without many of the responsibilities and restrictions that were part of the social group. So when people ("informants") made racist, sexist, or homophobic comments, I ignored it. I didn't want to jeopardize my relationship and ultimately the fieldwork by contesting the "informant." At first, I did not see the relevance of race, gender, or sexuality to the specific folk art we were discussing, the subject at hand. I believed people were drifting, going off on a tangent. But it soon became apparent that when people voiced their fears and hatreds to me—someone who was both an insider and an outsider—it was because those socially based sentiments had everything to do with their notions of identity and cultural reproduction. I just needed to follow the various threads.

American-born Italians and immigrants who arrived after World War II told me about moving from areas of early Italian settlement like Harlem in Manhattan and East New York in Brooklyn, as those neighborhoods underwent dramatic demographic shifts. Others saw their Brooklyn neighborhoods of Williamsburg and Carroll Gardens/Red Hook remain predominantly Italian but become more concentrated and ultimately gentrified.

Many were emotionally scarred and resentful at seeing their communities radically altered. Neighborhoods had been destroyed through a combination of economic disinvestment, banks "red lining" communities in regard to mortgage loans, "slum clearance," highway construction that destroyed viable apartment buildings, and the advent of hard drugs, gang activity, and violent street crime. But they directed their anger at recent arrivals, African Americans and Puerto Ricans, who were vilified as the cause of these social changes. It is not all that surprising that people reacted in the way they did; it is extremely difficult to see and understand how seemingly disconnected economic and political forces shape our daily lives.

While I was waiting for the demonstration to begin, I overheard two young white women, definitely not from Bensonhurst, talking despairingly about the neighborhood Italians, about their racism and conservatism. While I agreed with them, I could not help but think how ignorant these women were, unaware and uninterested in what drove working-class people to such vehement and visceral hatred. I was irritated with their white, liberal self-righteousness that conveniently targeted Bensonhurst's overt racism to veil their own prejudices. In the aftermath of the murder, similar distancing of middle- and upper-class whites from such "barbarism" made racism the sole problem and preserve of blue-collar whites.

After some internal struggle, I began to question people/"informants" when they raised what I deemed ugly statements and gently articulated my position, without being confrontational. I was a guest in their home, their community. I had both a personal and a professional desire to understand why Italians in New York had come to base their identity in direct opposition to people of color.

As part of my research, I culled local newspapers for leads and background information on the city's Italian American communities. I could not help but notice the involvement of Italian Americans in attacks on African Americans and Latinos. I started a clipping file, which soon grew. From Corona, Queens to Fordham in the Bronx, Italian Americans seemed hell-bent on stopping the city's changing demographics by policing the racial borders of "their" neighborhoods. Articles ranged from a single paragraph concerning an attack without any follow-up to front-page stories of homicide that lasted for days as well as being featured on the evening television news. There was the 1982 fatal bludgeoning of African American transit worker Willie Turks in Gravesend, Brooklyn, by twenty men. Four years later, a dozen whites wielding baseball bats and golf clubs chased three black men through the streets of Howard Beach in Queens. Michael Griffith, in a des-

perate attempt to escape his pursuers, clambered onto the nearby highway and was killed by an automobile. The Rev. Al Sharpton and others organized demonstrations in the neighborhood, assembling at a local pizzeria where the attack began. The charged symbolism of the pizzeria helped link the attack with the neighborhood's "Italianness," despite the fact that not all the assailants were Italian American.

During the same period, there were incidents reported in the newspapers that gave me hope as everyday Italian Americans opposed racist acts. The papers occasionally featured the work of Gerard Papa, a Bensonhurst native, who created the Flames Neighborhood Youth Association in 1974 with the specific aim of getting young men from South Brooklyn neighborhoods to play on multiracial basketball teams in an organized league. In 1986, thirteen-year-old John DeMarco testified in court that he witnessed a white man spray paint a racist and threatening message on a house in northeast Philadelphia that an African American family was considering to buy. "I felt that blacks have the same equal rights as whites, plus I have a lot of black friends, and I think there's really nothing wrong with black people at all."<sup>10</sup> Inspirational! Then in the summer of 1988, Salvatore Taormina, twenty-two, and Jeff LaMartina, twenty-four, came to the aid of a black man who was attacked by six white men wielding bats and sticks outside their pizzeria Café di Sicilia, in the Westerleigh section of Staten Island, New York. "There's too much racial violence going on. I went against six guys for a black guy and I'm glad I did. It's a matter of right and wrong, not black and white," LaMartina stated simply.<sup>11</sup> These people were my heroes.

In the summer of 1989, Brooklyn-based director Spike Lee released his fourth feature film, *Do the Right Thing*, based, in part, on the Howard Beach attack. White journalists expressed their concerns that the film would raise the thermostat for the proverbial "hot summer" and incite blacks to riot. The film had a profound effect on me because it looked at the Italian American version of racism I had experienced firsthand in New York. Pino, the character played by John Turturro, was an incredibly accurate portrayal of the confused and angry youth I had grown up with and interviewed. Lee's film reminded me of *Saturday Night Fever*, an earlier movie that problematized Italian American masculinity and racism. In that film, the character Tony Manero, frustrated by the corner boy lifestyle of turf battles, ethnic vengeance, rape, and a friend's suicide, rejected the provincialism of Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, by escaping into Manhattan—"the City." Was it necessary to physically and spiritually abandon one's community in search of a more complete and holistic self? How did one create an alternative sense of *italianità* that did not discard com-

munity ties? People who denounced Lee's film as anti-Italian never spoke out against racism in our communities or suggested how we deal with it. Instead, Italian American spokespeople remained obsessed with the self-serving mantle of defamation expressed each time another mafia movie was premiered or a politician's sleazy past was revealed. A few weeks after *Do the Right Thing* was released, life was about to imitate art imitating life.<sup>12</sup>

### BACK IN BENSONHURST

I was living back in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, when Yusuf was killed on Wednesday night, August 23, 1989.<sup>13</sup> I was scheduled to return after Labor Day to Philadelphia, where I was studying toward a Ph.D. in folklore, but I was compelled to do something before I left New York. The words of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. rang in my ears: "The tragedy of Birmingham is not what bad people did, but that good people did nothing."

The media reported that Al Sharpton would lead a demonstration in Bensonhurst on Saturday but did not provide logistical information. Newspapers, radio, and television were clearly ostracizing the media-savvy civil rights leader at that time. Sharpton led the Howard Beach demonstrations, forcing the media to pay attention to the racist attack that took place there and the legal system to render justice. His activism took a loopy turn when he became the spokesperson for fifteen-year-old Tawana Brawley from Yonkers, an African American who claimed to have been kidnapped and raped in 1987 by a group of white men. Several months later, the grand jury determined that Brawley's charges were false and might have been concocted in an attempt to protect herself from parental punishment. Sharpton's credibility came under increasing scrutiny when he came to the defense of black and Latino teenagers accused of bludgeoning and raping a white woman jogging in Central Park.<sup>14</sup>

Sharpton later admitted that he demonstrated in Bensonhurst to provoke neighborhood racists into revealing themselves for the television cameras. And they did so with a remarkable lack of self-consciousness, self-restraint, and media understanding. Images of Italian Americans waving the tricolor flags and making incredibly crude gestures and absurd statements ("I'm not a racist, I just hate niggers") were broadcast around the world. For years, friends and family in Italy would ask me to explain how Italians had become so vicious in America. The footage of angry, screaming people was an updated version of the black-and-white images from the civil rights movement that I had seen as a child growing up.

Television reporters announced that a "prayer vigil" would be held the following day, Sunday, August 27, mentioning the meeting time and location. This second event would be led by an alternative group of African American ministers—Rev. Timothy Mitchell, pastor of the Ebenezer Missionary Baptist Church in Queens; Rev. Calvin Butts of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem; and others. During the prayer service held at the site of the killing, one speaker asked, "Where are the members of this community?" I shouted my reply, "We're here!" The TV cameras whirled around. Everyone looked in silence. Then the clergy and speakers returned to their oratory, ignoring my presence. It was much easier for them, as well as the media, to have a monolithic evil Italian community than to hear or imagine Italian American voices of conscience and possible partnership. In the end, though, whom did I represent other than myself? What political entity could I muster? I never saw my sign in the newspaper or on television, despite the fact that I had been photographed and filmed.

Some Italian Americans pointed out that prominent Italian Americans did in fact condemn the killing, and criticized the media for ignoring these voices of reason. They maintained that the press was enthralled with the dramatic and facile images of monosyllabic bigots. This position was often coupled with the idea that the media were painting Bensonhurst in its entirety as racist, as if the neighborhood had become some hideous, sentient organism. The argument that Bensonhurst residents were victims of media assassination in effect stated, "We deplore the killing and racism but we're being attacked, too!"<sup>15</sup> Years later, I have read or heard that such-and-such Italian American attended Yusuf's funeral; that Politician A issued a press release in the early hours after the shooting to denounce racism, and Clergy B was diligently working behind the scenes toward peace, and so on. It was simply not enough. The Italian American leadership did a horrendous job of speaking clearly and repeatedly against racism and sufficiently representing us in the public eye. Those who did speak out needed to be more forceful, more vocal, and better organized in getting their message to the public. Months after Yusuf's death, Bensonhurst resident Anthony Iacono addressed the repeated demonstrations by poignantly commenting, "There is no one speaking for us. The council people and leaders wait until it is politically safe to say something."<sup>16</sup> As a community, we failed miserably at a crucial moment in the city's history, and we will live with the shame for years to come.

I did notice those within the Italian community who acted conscientiously during this time of crisis. Irene Deserio and her young daughter came

to the aid of Yusuf as he lay dying on the sidewalk. Lucy Capezza was part of a crowd of Bensonhurst residents who confronted the arrested suspects—Steve Curreri, Brian O'Donnell, and Pasquale Raucci—outside the 62nd police precinct the night of the killing. "You should be ashamed. You're afraid to show your face. You're a disgrace," Capezza was quoted shouting. One could not help but observe that it was Italian American women who often spoke out against the senseless killing.<sup>17</sup>

So there I was, with my sign, alone in the crowd. And out stepped this woman. I braced for the worst as she approached. Instead of taking a swing at me, she asked, "Can I walk with you?" and then "Who else is here with you?" That is what Stephanie Romeo remembers. For me, it was a bit of a cacophonous blur. Years later, as close friends, Stephanie and I still disagree about the exact place where she distanced herself from the crowd and walked into history.

Stephanie was living in Manhattan's East Village but her roots were in Bensonhurst. She and her family had lived there at various points in her life. It was where her maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, the extended family's anchors, lived. Her parents had an apartment on Bay Ridge Avenue, a mere four blocks away from where Yusuf was killed. Stephanie came back to the neighborhood that Sunday to witness for herself what she had been reading in the papers. She has written about that momentous afternoon on a number of occasions:

I ended up marching in Bensonhurst—not intending to, but happy for the experience. I was watching the march, observing the people around me, many of them upset that the media were making a big deal out of nothing. As the march passed by, I felt very emotional and very guilty. Guilty because I was a silent objector. Suddenly, I saw a guy pass by carrying a sign that said "Italians Against Racism." It had a magnetic power that drew me to him, and I ended up marching, and staying with him for the rest of the day.<sup>18</sup>

It seemed as if Stephanie's arrival attracted others. Camillo "David" Greco, an immigrant from Calabria who worked in a Brooklyn hospital, suddenly appeared, asking to march with us. A young Puerto Rican man and Bensonhurst resident joined us, as did the two white women I had seen earlier. We were about ten people by the end of the march, all moving under the same banner. We turned left onto Bay Ridge Parkway, with the beckling but thinning crowd still lining the sidewalk. Camillo drove me to the subway, my cardboard sign safely curled under my arm.



I never participated in any of the subsequent demonstrations. I went back to Philadelphia soon afterward to prepare for my qualifying exams, returning in November to a devastating recession under the first Bush administration.

#### BEYOND BENSONHURST

Yusuf's murder was a turning point in the city's political history, ultimately influencing the outcome of that year's mayoral election; David Dinkins became New York City's first African American mayor. It also had a dramatic impact on New York's Italian American community, as it fueled a tremendous amount of critical thinking and activity by Italian American scholars and artists, ultimately contributing to a more expansive, self-reflective, and socially engaged sense of identity.

Literary scholar and poet Robert Viscusi was deeply affected by the silence that hovered over Italian Americans in the aftermath of Yusuf's murder. "AJ Sharpton posed a real categorical challenge to Italian-Americans, and Italian-Americans came up short," Viscusi noted. "The problem wasn't that people were ignoring us. The problem was that we weren't saying enough."<sup>19</sup> Viscusi and other writers joined together to form the Italian American Writers Association (IAWA), an organization that creates venues for Italian American authors to meet, read their work, and add thoughtful Italian American voices and commentary to public discourse.

The New York musical and theatrical troupe *I Giullari di Piazza's* "folk operas," based on the Italian devotion to the *Madonna Nera* (Black Madonna) have dramatized the affiliations between southern Italian spirituality and pre-Christian goddess worship, including Native American and African-derived religious devotions. The "multicultural production(s) dedicated to Mother Earth" titled *The Voyage of the Black Madonna and 1492-1992: Earth, Sun, and Moon* juxtaposed the percussive music and dance of Italian traditional *pizzica* (trance music) and *tammuriata* (tambourine ensembles) with Gypsy flamenco of Spain, West African drumming, Afro-Brazilian music and dance, and the Thunderbird American Indian Dancers. *La Madonna Nera di Tindari, Cibele, Yemaya, the White Buffalo Woman*, and other sacred personages were evoked through performance in a vibrant and exhilarating vision calling for an inclusive spirituality and multiculturalism that offered a unique, roots-based Italian contribution.<sup>20</sup>

Contemporary culture from Italy also provides rich sources for reconfiguring *italianità* for members of the diaspora living in the United States. The

hip-hop nation has firmly planted its flag in Italy and *rap italiano* transformed the Italian cultural landscape during the 1990s by adapting and mixing rap and other world styles with local musical traditions, spoken vernacular, and the everyday concerns of Italian youth. The localizing of a global black popular culture in Italy was achieved through a series of interlocking elements. Hip hop artists rap in Italian as well as various Italian dialects, reappropriating a vernacular voice in opposition to a national trend of flattening language distinctiveness. Italian MCs and DJs create musical hybrids that combine the global pop styles of rap, reggae, dancehall, acid jazz, and trip hop with Italian folk and popular musical traditions. Italian artists address social and political issues, rapping about topics from the historic economic exploitation of the Mezzogiorno to the devastating impact of the mafia. In these ways, contemporary Italian artists are offering Italian Americans, especially the youth, examples of how to cultivate a renewed sense of Italian identity that is local and cosmopolitan, fresh and relevant.<sup>21</sup>

Recent academic scholarship has been instrumental in providing a nuanced understanding of Italian American history and offering a usable past on which to build a viable future. Historian Philip Cannistraro's 1997 groundbreaking conference, "The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism," sponsored by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute of Queens College, brought greater attention to left, radical, and progressive traditions among Italian Americans. We have learned much about historic figures such as garment worker and labor organizer Angela Bambace (1898-1975); photographer and revolutionary Tina Modotti (1896-1942), who helped define the vocabulary of Mexican modernism; union organizer and painter Ralph Fasanello (1914-1997); civil rights leader Father James Groppi (1930-1985), from Milwaukee; radical Congressman Vito Marcantonio (1902-1954), who represented New York's East Harlem; longshoreman and labor activist Peter Panto (1911-1939), who led a rank-and-file revolt against the corrupt union leadership on the Brooklyn waterfront; student leader Mario Savio (1942-1996) of the Free Speech Movement in Berkeley; anarcho-syndicalist and labor organizer Carlo Tresca (1879-1943); and many, many others.<sup>22</sup> We are reclaiming this radical and progressive left heritage abandoned in the wake of McCarthyist repression and middle-class assimilation. These historic champions of democracy and the rights of the working poor are a refreshing alternative to the litany of successful businessmen and conservative politicians Italian American *prominenti* endlessly herald as role models.

The reclamation of historical memory is particularly important for Italian American youth who seem bereft of inspirational role models. I will



never forget the comment uttered by Charles Gallante, a twenty-year-old from Howard Beach, Queens, when *capo di tutti capi* John Gotti was convicted in 1992: "I love this man. He's a beautiful Italian-American. How more beautiful do you want?"<sup>23</sup> In addition to real-life mobsters, media *mafiosi* with their one-dimensional view of Italian American identity and experience, have their own insidious influence. The American fascination with Italian American gangsters can be attributed to the familiar and foreign, the attraction and repulsion these fictional characters evoke. Italian Americans, especially those from the East Coast urban experience, find authentic portrayals of Italian American life in well-crafted and wonderfully acted films like *Goodfellas* and the television program *The Sopranos*. I thoroughly enjoy seeing my comfort foods of *pasta fazool'* and *sfogliatell'* lovingly presented, hearing the earthy phrases in southern Italian dialect, and seeing men kiss each other on the cheek in tender welcome. Just like my family. Too bad everything escalates into baseball bat threats and semiautomatic retribution. Nothing at all like my family. For middle America, on the other hand, East Coast *mafiosi* are slightly exotic, often buffoonish, and comfortably white. There is no rush to convene congressional hearings to investigate these celluloid mobsters, as has occurred with governmental scrutiny of the perceived menace of African American rappers and their use of violent imagery. While the impact of mafia movies and television programs on Italian American youth culture is difficult to quantify, its influence is visible among the emerging Italian American presence in hip-hop. Young MCs like the Lordz of Brooklyn, Jo Jo Pellegrino of Staten Island, Genovese from Yonkers, and Don Pigo from Philadelphia are microphone *mafiosi* inspired by mediated images of the country's "original gangstas."<sup>24</sup>

During the 1990s, Italian Americans for a Multicultural United States (IAMUS) emerged as an organization in which politically progressive Italian Americans could come together to work proactively on issues concerning them. IAMUS was founded in 1992 to protest the quincennial celebrations of Columbus's "discovery" of America and to stimulate Italian Americans' understanding of American racial history.<sup>25</sup> The annual Columbus Day parade on Fifth Avenue is not part of my childhood memories, and my family members do not conflate the deeds of a distant Columbus with their sense of ethnicity. The organization's "statement of purpose" challenged "Italian Americans to acknowledge the wrongs inflicted on people of color throughout U.S. history, and the privileges from which Italian Americans and other groups of European ancestry benefit." IAMUS activities included writing op ed pieces and newspaper articles; sponsoring study groups, forums, and con-

ferences on Italian American history; and participating in coalitions with other organizations on issues of social justice. For a time, the group organized potluck dinners at which participants discussed the conflict and sense of isolation growing up in politically conservative households and neighborhoods. It offered a progressive Italian American position that stood in marked contrast to mainstream and primarily conservative Italian American political ideology.

The tragedy of Yusuf Hawkins's death engendered an examination of conscience and values among Italian Americans in ways that simply did not exist before. As a result, an alternative *italianità* that ultimately aims to build "forms of solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities" has been set in motion.<sup>26</sup> This new ethnicity is not achieved without struggle, and remains a continuous and dynamic process. A network of self-identified and articulate Italian Americans who stand against racism and other forms of exploitation has been established. We are no longer alone, we are no longer silent.