CHAPTER 12

The Media

12.1 DONALD TRICARICO

Read All About It!

Italian Americans are the fourth largest White ethnic group in the United States, making up roughly 6 percent of the U.S. population. Although Italians began migrating to the United States during the colonial period, the largest immigration of Italians took place between 1880 and 1920, when some 4 million southern Italians came to the United States to escape economic stagnation and political and social mistreatment by an oppressive government. They soon formed ethnic enclaves primarily in the Northeast known as "Little Italy," and they sought low-skilled jobs in public works projects. Several scholars point out that early in the historical migration of Italians, U.S. society perceived them as an intellectually inferior ethnic group. Italian Americans were quickly portrayed as associated with organized crime syndicates. The media have furthered this "gangster" image of Italian Americans with such movies as The Godfather, The Untouchables, Goodfellas, and Prizzi's Honor.

The following selection from "Read All About It! Representations of Italian Americans in the Print Media in Response to the Bensonhurst Racial Killing," an original essay written for this book, exemplifies how old stereotypes about Italian Americans may resurface in some muted form during periods of ethnic conflict. In it, Donald Tricarico states that media accounts of the Bensonhurst racial killing in 1989 "invoked a stigmatized version of Italian American ethnicity, emphasizing themes of bigotry, criminality and social disorganization." Furthermore, Tricarico considers the media's treatment of Italian American stereotypes in the context of "deviance construction and "identity politics."

Key Concept: Italian Americans, mass media culture, deviance construction, racial status, and symbolic ethnicity

Abstract: *Mass media culture is a key site for the construction of ethnic identity. This article examines representations of Italian Americans in the print media in relation to the Bensonhurst (Brooklyn) racial killing in 1989. It maintains that media accounts invoked a stigmatized version of Italian American ethnicity, emphasizing themes of bigotry, criminality and social disorganization. Media representations are understood in the context of deviance construction and identity politics; in particular, foregrounding Italian American ethnicity compartmentalized racial guilt. Finally, implications of this media episode for Italian American identity are considered, with special reference to issues of racial status and "symbolic ethnicity".*

Ethnic identity is variable and fluid; boundaries, cultural referents, and modes of expression are negotiated in response to shifting circumstances. Identity negotiation is inherently political, with individuals and groups positioning themselves for scarce resources. Outcomes are a product of "the opportunities and constraints" that a contestant encounters at a particular time and place, and the cultural capital that they "bring to that encounter" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 195).

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Media culture is a prominent "construction site" for ethnic identity (Cornell and Hartmann: 195). Representations in the mass media constitute a significant "external boundary" for ethnic group identity, indicating a disposition to make ethnicity relevant and to invest it with certain cultural meanings (Royce, 1982: 2-5). Media representations reflect particular social interests and ideologies (Ferguson, 1998: 130; Grossberg et al., 1998: 178-183). Establishment media, in particular, have traditionally acted as "guardians of controlling value systems" (Schemerhorn, 1970: 12). The "cultural stories" about ethnic groups comprise a major store of knowledge held by outsiders (Lipsitz, 1998); distilled into stereotypes, they "underlie and condition interaction" in multiethnic societies (Lyman and Douglas, 1973: 347).

This article examines the media representations of Italian Americans in response to the killing of a Black teenager in the Bensonhurst section of Brooklyn on August 23, 1989, an event that has been characterized as "one of the most infamous bias incidents in recent history" (Pinderhughes, 1997: 2). A consideration of Italian American ethnicity accompanied the news reports and commentary on the killing, the protest marches and the subsequent court cases. This *public discourse,* which spanned the better part of one, year, comprised an "external boundary" that has special relevance for ethnic identity development.

Contemporary discourse about ethnicity in the mainstream media, informed by the implicit acceptance of multicultural diversity, tends to be celebratory and to specifically avoid negative generalizations. Thus, a local PBS station has produced a documentary film series on American ethnic groups that tries to create a kind of warm and fuzzy photo-album profile of each ethnic group and has a tendency to praise that group to the heavens, often citing the same virtues across the board: strong work ethic, solid family values, religious piety and the ability to make great food. (Berger, 1998)

In a society where racial and ethnic tolerance is legally and morally constrained, untoward characterizations of racial and ethnic groups are typically kept off the public stage. Once a despised immigrant minority, Italian Americans have lately received their share of ethnic celebration in the media. The above-mentioned PBS series celebrated them with two installments. A *New York Times Magazine* cover story in 1983 (Hall) trumpeted "the new respectability" of Italian Americans in mainstream life *without* compromising ethnic values like personal warmth and family cohesion. Even the tenement slums that were the bane of reformers like Jacob Riis and fodder for urban developers like Robert Moses are now cherished in the press. Recently, the *Times* carried two stories about neighborhoods in lower Manhattan that were settlements during the period of mass immigration from Italy before World War One, portraying them as colorful places for its readers to live:

Historically, this northern edge of Little Italy was a sleepy family neighborhood, home to several waves of immigrants who settled in its five- and six-story tenement buildings. Some of them moved up and out, but others turned into the gray-haired grandmothers who still sit out on the sidewalk in pleasant weather. (Cohen, 1998)

Like Mrs. Maggio, Tony Dapolito recalls a simpler time. His Vesuvio Bakery is an institution in the neighborhood.... During business hours the man some call the Mayor of Greenwich Village holds court, giving treats to babies, catching up and talking politics with a seemingly endless stream of people. (Lappe, 1998)

Bensonhurst has been acclaimed for its ethnic culture, although it has generated considerably less interest than the historic Manhattan neighborhoods settled during the mass migration from Italy. Two years after the Yusuf Hawkins killing, a *Times* food critic writing about the late summer zucchini harvest in backyard gardens portrayed Bensonhurst as "a living Italian neighborhood" where families make red

wine and "there are first communion celebrations that cost a year's rent"; the article featured a local restauranteur who not only puts zucchini on the menu but sings opera for his customers (O'Neill, 1991). Images such as these were conspicuously missing in the media response to the Hawkins killing, which is not remarkable given the circumstances of a "racial killing". What is remarkable in light of the current etiquette of public discourse about ethnicity was the negative representations of Italian American group life and identity.

This media discourse about Italian American ethnicity is significant given the increasingly accepted view in American sociology, evidenced in texts on racial and ethnic relations, that Italian Americans and European ancestry groups in general have only trivial interest as ethnic subjects. A neo-assimilationist paradigm has subsumed Italian American ethnicity within a "dominant group" ethnicity; to this extent, Italian Americans as a group are believed to have largely metamorphosed into *white,* or *Euro,* Americans (Doane, 1999; Hollinger, 1999).

The "media spectacle" (Kellner, 1995) that followed the Bensonhurst incident did not subscribe to this scenario. Given the central assumption of a "racial killing", there was ample room to construe events in terms of race relations. While race figured prominently, it was not a sufficient explanation. At times, nationality was juxtaposed to race, with Bensonhurst residents depicted as both Italian American and white. There were also times when nationality mattered more than race, and even confounded or contradicted it with scenarios in which Italian Americans were "less than white" (Roediger, 1994). Characterizations of ethnic group life in Bensonhurst as primordial and communal did not fit a "dominant group" model in which ethnicity is "optional" and "symbolic" (Waters, 1990; Gans, 1999).

This article is concerned with the cultural process of labeling "that is crucial to the construction of ethnicity" (diLeonardo, 1984:23). It pursues three interrelated issues. First, it distills the media "stories" that "constructed" an Italian American ethnicity in relation to the Bensonhurst "racial killing"; these accounts featured themes of social marginality and deviance, "re-presenting" Italian Americans in terms of the stigma historically reserved for a disparaged immigrant group. Second, the article asks why deviant meanings were appropriated as the epitome of Italian American ethnicity and, even more fundamentally, why Italian American identity mattered, or was foregrounded, in media accounts of a "racial killing"; these questions warrant a consideration of the interests and agendas that social actors bring to such "encounters" (Comell and Hartmann, 1998) and, more generally, "the processes that motivate ethnic boundary construction" (Nagel, 1999). Finally, since ethnicity is negotiated across a "double boundary" (Royce, 1982), the article ponders the implications of this episode of media representations for the identity strategies of Italian Americans.

STAGING ETHNICITY: PLACING ITALIAN AMERICANS AT THE SCENE OF THE CRIME

The event that occasioned this media encounter was the shooting death of a Black teenager on August 23, 1989. Sixteen year old Yusuf Hawkins and three teen age friends travelled to Bensonhurst by subway from the East New York section of Brooklyn to look at a used automobile that was for sale. Approaching the comer of Bay Ridge Avenue and 20th Avenue shortly before 9:30 PM, they were confronted by as many as twenty five youths from the neighborhood. The latter intended to engage Black and Hispanic males who were invited to a sixteenth birthday party for Gina Feliciano; Feliciano reportedly had "jilted" someone in the Bensonhurst contingent, Keith Mondello, for "a Black lover". It was Mondello who assembled the neighborhood group to seek revenge. The unsuspecting Hawkins and his friends were mistaken for Feliciano's guests. As matters spun out of control, four shots were fired

from a handgun and Hawkins was struck twice in the chest (see Stone, 1989 for an overview of the incident).

The killing spawned a protest march on August 26 through the streets of Bensonhurst organized by Black activist organizations under the leadership of Reverend Al Sharpton and the Reverend Herbert Daughtry. More than three hundred demonstrators clashed with local residents, with police in riot gear caught in between. Newspapers and television produced incendiary visual images of the hecklers, most of whom were young males, insulting Black marchers with conspicuous displays of watermelons and the chant of "Go home, niggers, go home" (Harney and Lubrano, 1989). This event had a special significance for the media narrative, not only because it compounded the tragedy of a "racial killing", but because it put the media spotlight on the Bensonhurst community.

The Bensonhurst case resulted in extensive coverage in the print media, the bulk of it reporting on the circumstances of the killing and the subsequent criminal trials (the incident was also the subject of a documentary film narrated by Shelby Steele, "Seven Days in Bensonhurst" that first aired on PBS on May 15, 1990). New York City newspapers were obviously a major forum and this article will focus on those publications; an INFOTRAC search yielded 147 entries associated with the name "Yusuf Hawkins" from *The New York Times* alone. The incident received feature coverage in national news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek* and was the subject of a cover story in *New York Magazine.* Essays appeared in both *Harper's Magazine* and Partisan *Review,* publications appealing to a cultural elite. The incident was the subject of a book by a free-lance journalist (DeSantis, 1991). Published well after the "media spectacle", it focused on the lives of *dramatis personae* into the inital round of court trials and is significant for muting the ethnic angle.

This discussion is not interested in the Bensonhurst incident itself, nor in media accounts of that incident, but in the way Italian American ethnicity was portrayed in the mainstream print media in response to that incident. Ethnic framing was not evident in every story about Bensonhurst, even those in which ostensibly Italian American actors (i.e., individuals identified by Italian surnames) were present. Most, although not all (e.g., Hamill, 1989), accounts conceptualized the incident as a racial drama in which Bensonhurst residents were cast as "whites":

'The black people don't belong here', a white teen-age girl said as she stood on the corner of 20th Avenue and 68th Street, not far from where Yusuf Hawkins was killed. (Terry, 1989)

Bishop Francis J. Mugavero of the Roman Catholic archdiocese of Brooklyn yesterday questioned the decision of some clergymen to conduct protest marches last weekend in Bensonhurst, where a black youth had earlier been shot to death after being chased by a white gang. (Glaberson, 1989)

Bensonhurst residents were also framed by social class, although largely to modify racial and ethnic identity:

Both Bensonhurst and the area of East New York where Mr. Hawkins lived are communities of blue-collar workers, many in construction or holding municipal jobs. (Kaufman, 1989)

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Such comments do not surprise Joanne Carretta, a 26-year-old white woman who has lived in the largely white, working-class neighborhood all of her life. (Terry, 1989)

A class analysis was salient in a November 1989 *New York Magazine* article (Stone, 1989) that emphasized the effects of dislocations in the city's economy on working class communities. Michael Eric Dyson in *The Nation* (1989: 302) utilized a class perspective in juxtaposing "the two racisms"-the racial violence of "tightly-turfed, blue-collar communities" like Bensonhurst and "its less visible but just as vicious middle- and upper-class counterparts".

While acknowledging that Italian Americans were positioned in terms of *race* and *class,* this discussion is specifically interested in the way that *ethnicity* was constructed. This recognizes that there was a "story" about Italian Americans within the Bensonhurst narrative. Certain accounts were notable for the composition of this other story. *The New York Times* published two investigative features within a week of the murder in which the ethnicity of Italian Americans was designated, on page one, as a major plot element (Bohlen, 1989; Kifner, 1989). The newspaper columnists Pete Hamill (1989) and Amy Pagnozzi (1989) offered ascerbic commentaries in the vernacular of ethnic stereotypes. Tile Vil*lage Voice,* an "alternative" weekly rooted in the bohemian culture of Greenwich Village, published related investigative features on the violent character of Italian American life in Bensonhurst in the September 5, 1989 edition. The memoirs of two former residents of Bensonhurst that were published, respectively, in *Harper's Magazine* in March 1990 and in *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1990 used the killing as a pretext to deconstruct Italian ethnic culture.

From the outset, news reports situated Italian Americans in the unfolding narrative of a "racial killing". Individuals and groups were explicitly framed by their Italian ancestry and heritage. For example, it was noted that the parents of the alleged killer (Joey Fama) "had emigrated from Italy and spoke only Italian at home" (Bohlen, 1989). Ethnicity could also be inferred from the perception of ostensibly Italian surnames, a strategy with limitations as evidenced by a defendant named Mondello whose mother was "originally Jewish" (Stone, 1989). Notwithstanding these glitches, ethnic credentials were liberally reserved for local actors. Thus, the defendants and other Bensonhurst locals were identified as "the children and grandchildren of immigrants from Italy" (Hamill, 1989). The "community" of Bensonhurst was perceived as "predominantly Italian American", with a population that "still lives in a web of traditions and rituals, many of them transplanted from Italy" (Bohlen, 1989). Frequent allusions to the old country underscored the *essentially* Italian American character of Bensonhurst. A front page *New York Times* (Kifner, 1989) feature one week after the killing threw this ethnic dimension into sharp relief in the lead paragraph: Banners and lights of red, white and green-the colors of the Italian flag-hang along 18th Avenue in Bensonhurst for the feast of Santa Rosalia. Normally the neighborhood's biggest event of the year, the feast is overshadowed now by the murder of Yusuf K. Hawkins, a black youth who had ventured into the neighborhood to look at a used car and was surrounded by a crowd of white youths and gunned down.

Italian ethnicity was tacitly invoked with references to popular cultural imaging such as street festivals and lawn shrines (Kifner, 1989; Quindlen, 1989; Bohlen, 1989). Local Italian Americans were identified by "elaborate hairdos" (Kifner, 1989) and "ankle bracelets" (Pagnozzi, 1989). Vernacular labels referenced to problematic stereotypes were used for Italian Americans:

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> You can still hear Jimmy Roselli singing on the jukebox of the Vegas diner, home away from home to Bensonhurst's *cugines* and *cugettes.* (Pagnozzi, 1989)

A leading role in the narrative was assigned to the "Mafia", a central category for apprehending the meaning of Italian Americans in the popular culture (Kifner, 1989; McAlary, 1989; George, 1989). Allusions to popular films like *Goodfellas, Do The Right Thing,* and *Saturday Night Fever* lent additional credibility to ethnic framing (Dson, 1989; Lee, 1989). Blurring the distinction between fiction and reality was a' signature element of the "media spectacle". In a guest column written for The *New York Daily News* (1989), Spike Lee uses the comments of a character in a film to explain the animus of Yusuf Hawkins' killers: "Pino, the racist son in 'Do The Right Thing', tells Sal, his father, 'We should stay in Bensonhurst and the niggers should stay in their neighborhood'". In the column, Lee, who was a visible participant in the first protest march staged in Bensonhurst, noted that the film's script was drawn from [the] Howard Beach incident in 1986-a case of life (Bensonhurst) imitating art ("Do The Right Thing") imitating life (Howard Beach).

ETHNIC FRAMING

The mass media "make meanings" in the sense that "codes" are employed to "interpret reality" (Grossberg et al., 1998: 178). These interpretations of reality are *representations. As* Grossberg et al. (179) point out,

The word *representation* literally means 're-presentation'. To represent Something means to take an original, mediate it, and play it back.

In the Bensonhurst narrative, several representations emerged to frame Italian American actors:

1. *provinciality* and *bigotry;*
2. *criminality,* and;
3. *social disorganization.*

These themes comprised an "interpretive framework" (Ferguson, 1998: 132) that supplied the main scaffolding for the "story" about Italian Americans embedded in the Bensonhurst murder drama. They purported to inform the public who Italian Americans were as an ethnic group, and who they were not. The interpretations that were offered precluded or overshadowed alternative ways of characterizing Italian American identity.

PROVINCIALITY AND BIGOTRY

> Twentieth Avenue in Bensonhurst starts in the Hudson River, where it is called Gravesend Bay, only a couple of miles from the Atlantic Ocean. You can see the ocean across the Belt Parkway, but Bensonhurst rarely looks. (Sullivan, 1990: 13).

A major thread in the Italian American story stresses the group's social and cultural isolation. The first two feature stories in The New York Times referred to Bensonhurst as "a closed community", a theme that echoed in synonyms such as "insular", "provincial", and "tightknit" (Kifner, 1989; Bohlen, 1989). DeMarco-Torgovnick, a professor of English at Duke, elaborated the isolation theme in a memoir written for Partisan Reviezv. A cultural insider who

escaped via an academic career and an exogamous marriage, she contended that "Italian Americans in Bensonhurst are notable for their cohesiveness and provinciality" (1990: 458). She described a way of life that "tends toward certain forms of inertia" and envelops residents, including her own parents, in an almost pathological fear of "change" (459). New York Post columnist Amy Pagnozzi similarly portrayed the life choices of young Italian Americans as circumscribed and "predictable".

The typical cugette might work in Manhattan as a secretary or receptionist while she waits to be married to the typical cugine, who might get a job at the airlines or in construction or on the police force.

And they marry: definitely within their race, almost definitely to an Italian, probably to someone from the neighborhood.

The "provinciality" of Bensonhurst was underscored by distinctions of cultural taste.' A Times reporter remarked on the "plastic pink flamingos and ceramic madonnas" found in some front yards (Terry, 1989). Even Andrew Sullivan's alternative interpretation Bensonhurst Italian Americans slipped a comment on the local taste culture with a description of "a statue of Our Lady of Guadelupe on the lawn, covered in cellophane to protect her from the rain". Another Times reporter called attention to young girls with "elaborate hairdos and names spelled out in gold necklaces" (Kifner, 1989). Cultural distinctions assumed an invidious dimension in the columns. New York Post columnist Pagnozzi (1989) sarcastically described a neighborhood landscape in which "big catering houses are as plentiful as the auto supply shops" (Pagnozzi, 1989).

In a column inspired by ugly altercations between Bensonhurst residents and predominantly Black protest marchers, The Post's Pete Hamill (1989) derisively catalogued local styles like "tattoos" and the "Guido cut, the hair cut straight across the back of the neck". Demonstrating the ear of Bernard Shaw's Professor Higgins, Hamill reserved extended comment for the local jargon, the few words and phrases that make up the language of Guidoville: "Ey, wah, ming, mah... 'Ev, I like to get some a dat... Whassamatta wit you, Joonyuh... I truckin' tole huh, I says to huh, I says, I dough wan no truckin' backtawk, and den I slap huh in da truckin' mout', I mean, in the mout', cause dat's all a trucking broad respects, a rap in da mout ... Huh mudthuh tells huh to be home oirly, says to huh, Who you truckin' gonna listen ta, ya truckin' mudthuh aw me? Mah... "

The portrayal of Italian American "insularity" entailed the repudiation of core middle class, American values. Underscoring the false arrogance of "Guidoville", Hamill wrote that

The Guido decides early that homework is for jerks. So is work... Go to a library? Read a book? Finish high school? Go to a university? *Figget abo't it!* Om gonna go work construkshun, eight bills an hour!

Although Hamill attempts to distinguish "Guido" from the majority of "respectable" people in Bensonhurst, this was undermined by the use of group stereotypes for Italian Americans.

In a less strident voice, Grizzuti-Harrison (1990: 75) recalled that, in her day, "Italians didn't believe in college because it threatened family authority", adding that "this has not changed". Interestingly, Grizzuti-Harrison and DeMarco-Torgovnick both drew invidious contrasts in regard to

Jewish culture and credit their relationships with Jews and liberal Jewish values for liberating them from the oppressiveness of Italian American life in Bensonhurst. Likewise, a CBS television producer named Alan Wiseman (1989) maintained in a Times Op-Ed piece that he took refuge in his father's Jewish heritage to escape the obtuse pettiness of his mother's Italian American ancestral culture. DeMarco-Torgovnick, who went on to become a professor at Duke University, found it difficult merely to visit Bensonhurst, the community where she grew up; a stay at her parental home for "several days" when her father is hospitalized by a stroke is enough to make her feel like she is "going to go crazy" (1990:465).

"Insularity" and "provincialism" were not portrayed merely as cultural eccentricity, but were linked to compelling moral issues. In particular, the media narrative underlined a tribal morality that featured exclusion of strangers. This tribalism was evident in the assertion of a "neighborhood loyalist" interviewed by Bauman and Chittum in Die Village Voice (1989): "This neighborhood has been Italian for 100 years and it's not going to change". Times Op-Ed columnist Anna Quindlen (1990) purported to capture the essence of communal amorality in the blase remark of an elderly woman that the media attention and the protest marches "had ruined the feast of Santa Rosalia".

DeMarco-Torgovnick identified this dark side of Italian American insularity and provincialism, adding that "only the slightest pressure turns those qualities into prejudice and racism" (1990: 458). Grizzuti-Harrison (1990: *The Media* 71) portrays Bensonhurst Italian Americans as "so embattled": "the 'Americans', the Jews, the others-were out to get them", although the frequency of "internecine fights" leads her to conclude that mistrust and fear dominated relationships within the ethnic group as well (71). Memories were retrieved depicting a strong animus toward Jews. Grizzuti-Harrison maintained that "almost all" of her "Italian neighbors were casually anti-Semitic" (1990: 77). This corroborated Alan Wiseman's *Times* Op-Ed piece (1989) which depicted the pervasiveness of anti-semitism in the Flatbush (Brooklyn) Italian American community of his youth. Wiseman proceeds to establish its more violent proclivities, including a vivid recollection of orthodox Jewish children receiving "a regularly scheduled pummeling every Friday outside the rectory" at the hands of older Italian American youth.

These personal experiences with anti-semitism established a precedence for Italian American "racism and prejudice". The most egregious manifestation of Italian American tribalism in the media narrative was the deep hostility toward Blacks. A front page *New York Times* story immediately following the killing reported "blunt expressions of racism" in "interviews with dozens of Bensonhurst residents" (Kifner, 1989). Another Times reporter described local residents "flaunting a racism so blunt that it shocked even veterans of the civil rights movement in Mississippi" (Bohlen, 1989). These and other articles established the overt ("blunt") and ordinary character of Italian American racial bigotry. Thus, "Richie a clerk from an auto-supply store" concludes that the girl (Gina Feliciano) whose birthday party set the stage for the murder should be faulted for the killing because "Any girl who brings blacks into this neighborhood is asking for trouble" (Pagnozzi, 1989). Even a venerable senior citizen like DeMarco-Torgovnick's father, when challenged to morally respond to the killing, can casually and unequivocally remark that Blacks "don't belong" in the neighborhood (1990:459). Once sentiments such as these were recorded, characterizations of Bensonhurst Italian Americans as "tightknit" and "insular" have to be read as coded representations of racist sentiments aimed at Blacks and other racial minorities.

Although racism was perceived as endemic to the community and ethnic culture, young males were portrayed as the agents of racial aggression. Street violence in Bensonhurst and in other

Italian American areas like Howard Beach, in fact, was perpetrated by males in their late teens and media accounts described them as inveterately hostile to Blacks and other minorities. Indeed, racial violence was depicted as the consummate expression of their peer group life and their role in the community (Baumann and Chittum, 1989; see also Pinderhughes, 1997). In a *Village Voice* article, these young males, "armed with baseball bats", were portrayed as having "taken their battle [with racial minorities) to the streets" (Bauman and Chittum, 1989).[2]

The portrait of embedded bigotry was tempered in a *New York Magazine* story which maintained that tolerance for nonwhites had significantly improved in the years immediately preceding the killing (Stone, 1989). The article noted that, despite some organized opposition, the nonwhite residential population of Bensonhurst had been increasing. It also pointed out the apparently contradictory fact that a nineteen year old Black man (Russell Gibbons) was part of the mob that confronted Yusuf Hawkins and his friends. After recounting "anecdotes of racism", Andrew Sullivan's article in the *New Republic* (1990) reported that racial mixing in Bensonhurst was more common than what was portrayed in media accounts immediately following the killing.

On the whole, however, the perception of racial tolerance was overwhelmed by the weight of images that framed Italian Americans as racists; one journalist overgeneralized "racist incidents" in communities like Bensonhurst and Howard Beach into a trend whereby "blacks have been murdered in predominantly Italian neighborhoods" (Haalasa, 1989). Discrepancies with the dominant interpretation that cast the killers as Italian Americans and Italian Americans as racists were muted or swept aside (see below).

CRIMINALITY

The Bensonhurst "media spectacle" made criminality an integral element of both the killing and local Italian American life. An especially significant role was attributed to the "Mafia". Mafia employment was portrayed as highly desirable to young males.

> Would-be wiseguys talk in hushed tones about an uncle who's "connected", a cousin who's "involved", hoping to be set up for life ... (Pagnozzi, 1989).

A Village *Voice* article uncovered a "hard-core" element striving for "a position in 'La Cosa Nostra'"; one "wannabe gangster", a twenty year old named "Frank", was portrayed as auditioning for local "wiseguys" by committing small-time crime (Bauman and Chittum, 1989). According to Daily *News* columnist Mike McAlary (1989), "In Bensonhurst, as in Howard Beach, we now have wiseguys and wannabe gangsters all over the place". In a national weekly magazine, a song by Melvin Gibbs called "Howard Beach Memoirs" was recalled for the lyrics: "Ethnically, the only thing these white Italian youth have to look up to is gangsters" (Haalasa, 1989). Village Voice reporters remarked that street violence aimed at nonwhites by Italian American youth was "fortified by their faith in the Godfather myth" (Bauman and Chittum, 1989).

Mafia influence was portrayed as having more far reaching significance. A Village Voice article reported that "the Mafia presence still pervades Bensonburst, cloaking the neighborhood in ostentatious secrecy, like the tinted windows of the stretch limousines that line 18th Avenue" (Bauman and Chittum, 1989). A *New* York *Times* story noted that "Federal prosecutors say the Mafia... has a strong presence in the community" and that the Mafia was part of the cultural baggage "transplanted from Italy" (Bohlen, 1989). Bauman and Chittum (1989) eased the Mafia into the local landscape:

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A few blocks from their corner is the old bakery where the "Pizza Connection" heroin busts were made. At 74th Street and 18th Avenue is the Caffe Giardino, allegedly owned by Giuseppe Gambino, nephew of Carlo, who served as "boss of bosses" in New York until his death in 1976.

There is also the impression that Mafia codes are embedded in a shared culture or, perhaps, vice versa. The opening paragraph in DeMarcoTorgovnick's essay (1990) makes the case that the Mafia has historically received legitimation from Bensonhurst Italian Americans for excluding Blacks:

The Mafia protects the neighborhood, our fathers say, with that peculiar satisfied pride with which law-abiding Italian Americans refer to the Mafia: the Mafia protects the neighborhood from "the coloreds". In the fifties and sixties, I heard that information repeated in whispers, in neighborhood parks and in the yard at school in Bensonhurst. The same information probably passes today in the parks (the word now "blacks", not "coloreds").

While the reluctance of the local population to give testimony in the case can be attributed to Mafia intimidation, the term "Bensonhurst amnesia" used by prosecutors and the press implied complicity on the part of Bensonhurst residents in Mafia moral codes (Roberts, 1989; see also Pinderhughes, 1997).

For the most part, however, it is a "wiseguy" street culture with indirect and latent ties to the Mafia that is the centerpiece of the criminality motif. Bauman and Chittum (1989) elaborated on the menacing character of these youth, especially their commitment to violence:

"For some reason, I'm up all the time", says Frank. "I just like to abuse people". Even when the guys on the corner are not doing anything to attract police attention, they play at being wiseguys. Most of them own BB guns. And on a really slow night, they meander down to Gravesend Bay and shoot at rats-"target practice" for more serious games.

The article emphasized the inveterate ruthlessness of their ways. Sal, "a young enforcer for the mob", sent a message to local "crackheads".

Sal soon caught up with the next kid. He stabbed him in the throat-slit him-17 stitches.

The authors concluded that the predatory disposition of these youth meant that "pedestrians", not just Blacks, were vulnerable to "group harassment" in Bensonhurst. In fact, they cautioned that the "wiseguy" menace was being exported to upscale neighborhoods when the member of one crew bragged about "going over to the Village to beat up some Yuppies" (Bauman and Chittum, 1989). As discussed below, the violent nature of menacing Italian American youth was later elaborated by a "feral" metaphor that sounded notes of dehumanization and primitive danger (Roberts, 1990; Letwin, 1989).

"Wiseguy" street culture was the link between the Mafia *(the* mob) and "the mob" of neighborhood youth that confronted Yusuf Hawkins and his friends. It was noted in the first news reports that the youth who allegedly shot Yusuf Hawkins had relatives with affiliations to a Brooklyn crime family; a certain uncle allegedly helped him flee the city and acted to suppress harmful testimony against him (Kifner, 1989). In addition, the youth who assembled the neighborhood mob was rumored to have been sponsored by the Mafia as a low-level drug dealer (Stone, 1989).

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SOCIAL DISORGANIZATION

A third frame in the media narrative depicts an Italian American community in disarray and in eclipse. In this scenario, Bensonhurst is "the last Italian neighborhood in the city" (George, 1989). It is portrayed as imminently threatened by unwelcome outsiders, especially immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Central America. This had, in fact, been occuring, as Italian Americans continued to leave for more suburban settings. Interestingly, the media narrative largely ignored processes of acculturation and upward mobility, which is difficult to reconcile with the assumption of cultural backwardness.

Notwithstanding this discrepancy, Bensonhurst was portrayed as being on the brink of ethnic succession by racial minorities. This succession was seen as corroding Italian American institutions. A Village *Voice* story delineated an apocalyptic scenario where "remaining white homelands" like Bensonhurst "turn into Third World Villages", "the local pizzerias will sell beef patties", and new ethnic "mafias" operate the rackets; this prospect was expected to exacerbate "the anxiety of the working class Italian teen in Bensonhurst, getting bum-rushed culturally if not physically every day of his life" (George, 1989).[3]

Disorganization assumed an economic dimension that was most consistently developed by Michael Stone in New York magazine (1989; see also Dyson, 1989). Stone linked the eclipse of Italian American Bensonhurst to the erosion of the city's blue-collar economy, in particular, the shrinking of the manufacturing sector and the loss of union jobs. With "an economy in the toilet" (Quindlen, 1990), youth were portrayed as particularly anomic and desperate. It was reported that the school drop-out rate was burgeoning and that Italian Americans, in fact, had the highest rate among the city's white populations; none of the vouthful defendants in the Hawkins killing were enrolled in school (Stone, 1989). A link was established between a high school dropout rate and high rates of unemployment on the one hand, and an increase in violent crime (30% in the five years prior to the Hawkins killing) and the use of illegal drugs on the other (Stone, 1989; see also Bauman and Chittum, 1989). A number of journalists, including Maria Laurino (1989) who subsequently became a speech writer for David Dinkins during his mayoralty, concluded that these developments had created "an underclass" among Italian American youth. The stigma attached to this label made Italian American youth even more dangerous (see below).

Bensonhurst was portrayed as under siege from the *inside* as well as the outside. A Village Voice feature created the impression of an ominous state of affairs in which gangster culture ruled; according to the article, the "calm surface" of the neighborhood belied a situation where "sudden death from less than natural causes is not unusual" (Bauman and Chittum, 1989). By all appearances, "wiseguys" had a free rein, intimidating solid citizens and inhibiting civic responsibility (Roberts, 1990; Hamill,1989). As long as residents obeyed local codes, the violence under the "surface" was mainly spent in tribal conflicts among "wiseguys".

Other accounts portrayed divisiveness as a communal trait. Thus, DeMarco-Torgovnick (1990: 458) called attention to "Italian Americans' devotion to jealous distinctions and discriminations". Grizzuti-Harrison (1990: 71) illustrated one of the more significant intraethnic divisions, reflected in the animosity and resentment on the part of Italian Americans for Italian immigrants:

"We got this big influx of Italians from the Old Country-geeps. They're not like us. They got a chip on their shoulder.... The geeps are here three years, and they got money to buy a four-

family house. That's all they think about is money. They never heard of going to the movies. They never heard of anisette. They never even heard of coffee. What kind of Italian is that?"

Bauman and Chittum (1989) gave internecine divisions a bellicose cast.

According to Frank, Brooklyn Italians hate Long Island Italians, Long Island Italians hate Jersey Italians, and they all hate Staten Island Italians. Furthermore, Brooklyn Italians from different turfs are obliged to knock heads. "If different Avenues are at a club, they always have to fight each other".

In these portrayals, the image of a cohesive ethnic community-"a world of tightknit families" (Kifner, 1989)-is regarded with a cynical eye. There is an inference that, in contrast to mainstream American community, social commitment is seriously deficient in Bensonhurst, even within the ethnic group. Communal solidarity (i.e., what makes families "tightknit") in Bensonhurst was depicted as essentially a war of all against all (and "all" against Blacks, Jews, etc.), a scenario that resonates with the "long discredited", though apparently still resilient, Banfield thesis of amoral familism (see Filippucci, 1996: 54; Tricarico, 1984b). Outsiders reading these accounts could infer that the "last Italian neighborhood" in New York City had descended into anarchy.

LABELING ITALIAN AMERICANS DEVIANT

Motifs of racial bigotry, criminal violence and social disorganization framed Italian American ethnicity as a "social problem". To that extent, the "construction" of an ethnic boundary was simultaneously a process of "deviance construction" (Schur, 1984: 28; Becker, 1963; Gusfield, 1981). In the Bensonhurst case, media accounts positioned Italian Americans outside of mainstream cultural life; their cultural *otherness* was evidenced in matters ranging from consumption styles (e.g., pink flamingos and jogging suits) to speech patterns (e.g., "broken" English). Cultural *difference* was then linked to moral *deviance,* in particular criminal violence and racial bigotry. Indeed, Italian American identity was *stigmatized* by the very fact of being referenced to a "racial killing" and an ensuing "moral panic". "Cultural stories" that associated Italian American peoplehood with "stigma-laden definitions" were legitimated by the establishment media and disseminated into the public discourse (Schur: 5-12).

Alternative, empowering motifs for constituting Italian American ethnicity were contained or omitted.[4] Nowhere in the "media spectacle" was credibility accorded to a viable ethnic culture based on the shared family traditions that have historically anchored the moral order of urban Italian American communities (Tricarico, 1984': 20-32). For the most part, the mainstream narrative left little room for the views of Italian Americans, with the exception of those prepared to corroborate the deviance paradigm (see below). The tone of these accounts implied that Italian Americans were not privy to the discussion taking place about them, perhaps even that they lacked the cognitive requirements for access to literate publications like *Die New York Times* and *Partisan Review.*

The *problem* of Italian American ethnicity was elevated to the status of a "moral panic" when the Bensonhurst incident was linked to highly publicized issues of street violence associated with Black and Latino teenagers (Letwin, 1989; Stein, 1990). More specifically, Italian American teenagers like those involved in the killing were likened to the "wilding crews" held responsible for the "epidemic" of street crimes in the city, especially "the Central Park jogger case".[5] "Feral" metaphors portrayed the "Bensonhurst boys" as displaying "an animal energy" and "forming pack groups" that threatened whites

in upscale neighborhoods (Bauman and Chittum, 1989). A *New York Times* columnist detected "similarities between the feral youth of Bensonhurst and their Black and Hispanic counterparts" (Roberts, 1990). Perceived "similarities" to African American and Latino youth led a *Village Voice* writer to label "Italian American kids, the third underclass in the city right now" (Laurino, 1990). This comparison effectively slotted Italian American youth into the "media images and political discourse" that routinely links nonwhites to social pathology and represents whites as "besieged" (Lipsitz, 1997: 112). Linked to a culture of underclass pathology, young Italian American males were represented as having crossed the color line.'

The moral panic specifically targeted Italian American youth identified as "Guidos". An Italian proper name, "Guido" designated an Italian American style within local youth culture (Tricarico,1991). In the press, however, "Guido" became a category of deviance. The youth who allegedly fired a handgun at Yusuf Hawkins was identified as "a typical Guido" in a *Village Voice* article (Dobie, 1989). "Guido" was elaborated as an ethnic epithet in Pete Hamill's column in *The Nezv York Post* (1989); Hamill's portrayal of "the boys from Guidoville" as "snarling imbeciles" put *into print* what is typically said in private discourse ("behind their backs").

With this depiction in the press, youth cultural style became a conspicuous marker for social deviance and moral degeneration (see also Pagnozzi, 1989; Quindlen, 1990). Feral references might have become more prominent were it not for availability of Mafia imagery and the casting of Italian American teenagers as "wannabe wiseguys". When John Gotti's brother Gene was depicted in a "Fila jogging suit", "Guido" style acquired Mafia connections (Pagnozzi, 1989; see also Tricarico, 1991). Still, it was the comparisons to "wilding" Blacks, even more than the Mafia, that made "Guido" a *public* peril because "Guidos" were not Black, crass stereotypes could not be construed as racist. The press had created a new "folk devil" (Cohen, 1980), with the "Guido" as contemporary version of the notorious "Dago".

The overall narrative did not exclude alternative images. Andrew Sullivan's article in *The New Republic* (1990) went the furthest in this regard. Sullivan managed to find people like "Father Barozzi... a genial Italian... making a genuine effort to counter bigotry";

Or take Gerard. Born and brought up in Bensonhurst, he's a wiry, almost nerdy Italian in early middle age who made it to Columbia College and Law School. He went to Wall Street as a corporate tax lawyer, but in his twenties decided to do something for his old neighborhood and started a basketball team for local youth.(16)

Sullivan called attention to "the easy racial mixing on the street", although noting that since Bensonhurst had "virtually no Black residents at all", this mainly pertained to those for whom Bensonhurst was a workplace in the daytime. In contrast to Hamill's gratuitous reference to a moral "bourgeois" majority in Bensonhurst, Sullivan inspired a credible belief that "another Bensonhurst clearly exists" (17).

However, representations that countered the dominant "interpretive framework" were scarce, especially in the establishment press at the height of the "media spectacle". Sullivan's essay was published almost a year after the killing and, in fact, was offered as a reflection on the "hysterical media" (13). Even then, he cautions that it is "not clear" which Bensonhurst "will emerge from the agony of the last few months" (17). It should also be noted that images of

"another Bensonhurst" were not specifically linked to Italian American culture. Thus, while Sullivan locates moral Italian Americans, he does little to redeem Italian American ethnicity.

ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY POLITICS

The Bensonhurst incident occasioned the construction of Italian American ethnicity in the print media as a *social problem.* It remains to inquire about "the processes that motivate ethnic boundary construction" (Nagel, 1999:58). The intention to invoke ethnicity and the manipulation of ethnic meaning reflects interests and strategies that fluctuate with changing circumstances (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 77). Media representations in the Bensonhurst case can be referenced to "ideological choices" (Grossberg at al., 1998: 178-179) that reflected organizational and personal agendas at a particular historical juncture.

The murder of Yusuf Hawkins was imbued with strategic significance for a Black identity politics. It became a platform for the populist ethnic entrepreneur and political activist Reverend Al Sharpton who led civil rights marches through Bensonhurst; Sharpton was stabbed at one of the marches by a young Italian American man who was part of the crowd. Sharpton was determined to create and manipulate a "media spectacle" (Steele, 1990). Without a prominent leader with a savvy media strategy, the Bensonhurst incident, like the racial killing in Howard Beach in 1986, may not have acquired a compelling public profile. These two episodes can be contrasted with the death of a Black vocational high school student in a playground fight with local Italian American youth in the South (Greenwich) Village in the 1970s (as in Bensonhurst, there were rumors in the neighborhood that the Mafia spirited the Italian American boys into hiding). That incident generated only token media attention and had no political fallout (see Tricarico, 1984b: 97-101).

Circumstances were quite different in 1989 for other reasons. The Bensonhurst "racial killing" took place just days before the Democratic mayoral primary and two months before the general election. It made a powerful case for the election of the city's first African American mayor who could, perhaps, soothe Black anger and alienation while salving white liberal guilt and keeping the populist Al Sharpton at bay. Dinkins' Republican opponent was Rudy Giuliani whose ethnic connection to Italian American Bensonhurst may have accentuated the perception that he was not sensitive to racial minorities; Giuliani's racial politics, at the same time, may have reinforced the stereotype of Italian American racial bigotry.

Other issues in the mayoral election imparted a racial cast to the Bensonhurst incident. Notwithstanding an Italian surname, Giuliani is not typified as an Italian American on the public stage (he provoked the ire of many Italian Americans when he threatened to shut down the city's most popular street *fiesta* for alleged Mafia ties). Politically, he has been prominently framed by racial divisions between whites and Blacks (e.g., the 1999 killing of African immigrant Amadou Diallo by four undercover police officers with the controversial Street Crimes Unit); to this extent, Giuliani's racial politics resonated with Italian Americans as *whites.* In the context of the 1989 mayoral election, Black leaders like Al Sharpton and Herbert Daughtry *whitened* both the issues and the cast of characters in Bensonhurst to fit a racial scenario. Prominent liberal political columnists projected a Dinkins victory as vindication for racial violence and the evils of *white racism* more generally (Klein, 1989; Roberts, 1989).

Media outlets may be assumed to pursue their own "agendas". According to Ferguson (1998: 56), media representations are "usually undertaken without reflection or consideration". Lule (2000: 356) suggests the influence of takenfor-granted cultural understandings, noting that representations "may result in part from the press' limited and limiting cast of symbolic types". Regardless of whether media outlets

pursued an "intentional agenda" (Ferguson, 1998: 56), coverage of the Bensonhurst incident *exposed* an external ethnic boundary.

Notwithstanding the establishment media's ethnocentrism, deliberate decisions were made inside media organizations to invoke Italian American ethnicity as relevant to a "racial killing" and to allow certain images to proliferate in the public discourse. It is instructive to note that ethnicity was *not* invoked in a front page *Times* article about the history of "racial violence" in the intergroup relations of Hasidic Jews and Blacks in Crown Heights. Indeed, although the Hasidim were essentially described as insular and exclusive, ethnic cultural traits did not inform an "interpretive framework" in the narrative of the community's conflict with Blacks (Yardley, 1998). Similarly, the *Times* did not invoke ethnicity to frame the "roving bands" of young men that sexually assaulted as many as fifty women near Central Park immediately following the National Puerto Rican Day Parade, in an incident that recalled the "wilding" panic of 1989 (Rashbaum and Chivers, 2000). Accompanying pictures of the participants culled from videotapes suggested that ethnic framing was plausible. However, the *Times* portrayed the suspects as without any defining ethnicity: "the police yesterday arrested six young men, from all around the region and all walks of life, and charged them in the rampage of sexual assaults Sunday in Central Park" (Rashbaum, 2000). A week after the riot, a front page story reinforced a perspective that de-emphasized ethnicity:

Just as a thundercloud is fueled by moisture and heat, Sunday's attacks on women in Central Park were fueled by an alchemy of alcohol, marijuana, oppressive weather, testosterone and lapses police strategy, tactics and communication. (Barstow and Chivers, 2000)

In the Bensonhurst case, the significance of being Italian American was often exaggerated in media accounts. For example, the "mob" that confronted Yusuf Hawkins was not ethnically homogeneous. Of the six defendants in the murder case, one had a German surname (Charles Stroessler) while another, the alleged "ringleader" (Keith Mondello), was half Jewish (Stone, 1989). A young Black man (Russel Gibbons) admitted to have carried baseball bats to the attack. However, this diversity was muted during the "media spectacle". It took more than three years for a reporter to ask "the most obvious question: What was a black man doing with a group of white guys who intended to beat up a group of black guys for coming into their neighborhood?" (Gelman, 1992)."Thev're my friends", he answered. "We do everything together. If I was in trouble, Keith Mondello would come to my side. I was there for him." (Gelman, 1992)

An "interpretive framework" that privileged Italian American ethnicity could not effectively assimilate this information (the discrepancy created by Gibbons' racial identity was significantly allieviated when criminal charges against him were dropped in a plea bargain). The stereotypes that dominated the narrative, legitimated by the popular culture, created the appearance that the individuals who comprised the mob, regardless of their actual ethnic and racial identities, were acting Italian American.

Deviance labeling is typically grounded in "the definers' perception that the deviants pose some kind of threat to their specific interests or overall social position"; devaluation and stigmatization processes operate to keep deviants "under control, or in their place" (Schur, 1984: 8-9). In the Bensonhurst case, media representations of Italian Americans similarly established invidious contrasts that are at the core of ethnic constructs (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998:20). By invoking and, then, devaluing Italian American ethnicity, blame was compartmentalized-a "cognitive device" that deflected blame from wh*ite* Americans (Pinderhughes, 1997: 2_3; Zack, 1998: 63). Insofar as establishment media

serve as the "guardians" of mainstream morality (Schemerhorn, 1970: 12), the privileging of Italian American ethnicity reverberated for a "moral economy of racism" (Lipsitz, 1997). This moral calculus was identified by Shelby Steele in a PBS documentary, "Seven Days in Bensonhurst" (1990), which aired almost eight months after the killing. It is now as disturbing for a white to be called a racist, as it is for a black to be called a nigger. By making a special show of concern for Hawkins, whites could demonstrate their racial innocence, if for no other reason than to fight off the charge of racism. Where race is concerned, innocence is power.

The positioning for "racial innocence" may be viewed as a strategy for resource competition" (Nagel, 1999: 58). Moreover, the "scapegoating" of Italian Americans for morally reprehensible acts (Schaefer, 1996: 47) had consequences beyond the assignment of racist guilt. Political and economic claims could also be contained to the extent that racist violence could be construed as an isolated, Italian American problem rather than a societal problem. This "problem" with Italian Americans disguised a "problem" that is quintessentially American (Lipsitz, 1997; Dyson, 1989). Racial violence in Bensonhurst made *white* racism translucent, which was a *problem* in its own right that invited censure. To the extent that Italian Americans strive to be white, the dominant position in the American racial hierarchy, attributing racial ambiguity to Italian Americans can be construed as a punitive response.

An "interpretive framework" based on *ethnic* deviance preempted explanations based on race. Except for an essay by African American Studies professor Michael Eric Dyson in *Vie Nation* (1989), establishment media did not frame the "racist" attitudes and behavior of Bensonhurst residents as *racial deviance,* even when they were identified as "white"; although Bensonhurst Italian Americans could be categorized as white, their racism was attributed to their ethnicity. They were also portrayed as acting "blue-collar" or "working class", although class deviance was largely confounded with ethnicity. Deviant cultural distinctions, such as "broken" speech and "high" hair, are also class signifiers, as is the "blue-collar" occupational profile attributed to "Guidos" and "cugines" (Hamill, 1989; Pagnozzi, 1989). Similarly, the socioeconomic status of Bensonhurst Italian Americans, which made them vulnerable to structural changes like the decline of a manufacturing economy, exacerbated their purported ethnic predisposition to "problem" behaviors like racism (Stone, 1989).

Deviance labeling was promoted by the "moral panic" associated with "wilding" crimes. The use of feral metaphors in the public discourse illustrates the extent of the "moral panic" in the city at the time (Letwin, 1989). A connection between random sexual assault, such as in the Central Park jogger case, and the "turf" fights that characterized both the Bensonhurst and Howard Beach incidents, was a stretch. Nevertheless, Italian American youth appear to have been swept up in the fervor. Embedded ethnic stereotypes made them vulnerable to inclusion in "wilding" imagery. The emergence of ethnic epithets like "Guido" in the establishment press also revealed the moral panic that surrounded Italian Americans.

Representations of Italian Americans can also be linked to media agendas in the 1989 mayoral election. A guest column written by film maker Spike Lee in *The Daily News* (1989) explicitly placed the event in an electoral context. The depiction of Italian Americans as anti-Semitic in Wiseman's *Times* Op-Ed essay may have been intended as a message to elements in the city's large and influential Jewish population, struggling to salvage a tradition of liberalism in a trying period for Black-Jewish relations. A vote for Dinkins, who was endorsed by *The Times,* reflected a commitment to this tradition. It should be noted that support for Dinkins did not include orthodox Jews in Crown Heights and Williamsburgh who were embroiled in racial conflicts in their own neighborhoods and have been among the most consistent supporters of Guiliani's mayoralty (Yardley, 1998). Since the mayoral contest symbolically "re-presented"

the ethnic issues played out in the streets of Bensonhurst between African Americans and Italian Americans, blame for the racial hostility of Italian Americans in Bensonhurst could be transferred to Rudy Giuliani who shared in an ethnic heritage that was framed as morally dubious.

Even without the play of "intentional agendas", issues of power and ideology are implicit in the "interpretive repertoires" of the media (Ferguson, 1998: 30-32). In the Bensonhurst case, media power was evidenced in the way that representations of Italian Americans were "imposed" rather than negotiated through "dialogue" (Ferguson, 1998: 168). The Times did not publish an OpEd piece that balanced the blatantly incriminating essay by Alan Wiseman and printed only four response letters, none of which critically challenged to Wiseman's logic and motivation (see below). The Times did not give Italian Americans an opportunity to write their own story. It is noteworthy that when Italian Americans were given significant space in the establishment media, in particular Grizzutti-Harrison in *Harper's* and DeMarco-Torgovnick in *Partisan Review,* their essays collaborated in disparaging Italian Americans from inside the ethnic boundary.

Deviance labeling is facilitated by a power imbalance, in particular, a perception that there would not be commensurate responses to "counter stigmatization" (Schur, 1984: 8). In the Bensonhurst case, a power imbalance was rooted in the historical subordination of Italian Americans in the American system of ethnic stratification, featuring a "discursive reserve" (Ferguson, 1998: 130) of hurtful cultural stereotypes. Moreover, Italian American advocates may not have possessed the necessary leverage to "represent" the group in the mainstream media, for example, to obtain Op-Ed space in the *Times*. An Italian American anti-defamation group did secure a private meeting with Pete Hamill and *The New York Post,* presumably reacting to the most egregious expression of ethnic antipathy in the media spectacle, and on the part of a writer prominently identified with a historic ethnic rival. Nevertheless, an Italian American response to "Guidoville" was not incorporated in the public record.

There is also the possibility that capable ethnic entrepreneurs, and mainstream Italian Americans more generally, were intimidated by the media "panic" and reluctant to publicly align with the spoiled ethnicity of Bensonhurst Italian Americans, especially "Guido" youth (Vecoli, 1996: 14). To this extent, the Bensonhurst incident may have exposed invidious status and cultural distinctions among Italian Americans; upward mobility and assimilation have historically been predicated on "escaping" blue-collar, ethnic neighborhoods like Bensonhurst.

Aside from institutional agendas, the Bensonhurst "media spectacle" was fueled by an opportunistic *personal* politics. This was reflected in recollections submitted to the public record by wounded insiders who defected from the ethnic community. They had personal scores to settle and the moment was propitious; they were given access to prominent publications to vent personal troubles that overlapped with public issues. Both Grizzuti-Harrison and DeMarco-Torgovnick, for example, harbored deep grudges against Bensonhurst's ethnic culture for perceived personal oppression; the latter still claims to be traumatized by "the conditions of [her] youth" (1990: 466). In Alan Wiseman's Times OpEd piece (1989), the denigration of Italian Americans (his comments are not confined to Bensonhurst) originate in a family conflict, in particular, his maternal grandfather's disappointment with his mother for "marrying a Jew", and the bullying of Jewish schoolboys by tough "Italian kids" in the old neighborhood. His conviction that Italian Americans were capable of racial violence in Bensonhurst, even though he admitted that he did "not know what really happened", is based on the actions of other Italian Americans in some other place and at some other time.

CHAPTER 12

The Media

ETHNIC IDENTITY CRISIS

Media representations of Italian Americans in Bensonhurst racial killing reflected "a particular kind of identity" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 184). What it meant to be Italian American was conveyed by a cognitive distortion (i.e., ethnic stereotypes); certain traits found in every population, like insularity and racial intolerance, were made salient while others were minimized or consigned to insignificance. By linking racial violence to a shared culture, responsibility was generalized from the individuals who authored a racial attack to an Italian American community, and then to Italian Americans *as an ethnic group.* Overgeneralizations simplified a complex ethnic reality, an outcome facilitated by the uneven distribution of knowledge about constituent groups in multiethnic societies (Lyman and Douglas, 1973: 347). Media "re-presentations" constituted an "ideological choice" in which "a particular way of seeing" was privileged; representations of Italian Americans were *ideological* also to the extent that "the mediated character of this construction" was concealed (Grossberg et al., 1998: 182-183).

The "fundamental" advantage of group identity is arguably its ability to lend the individual "some measure of esteem" (Isaacs, 1975: 95). To this extent, the Bensonhurst "media spectacle" became problematic for an identity development that struggles to reconcile with higher status levels and mainstream life-styles (Tricarico, 1984a). At other times and under different circumstances, the mainstream media has conspicuously elevated the prestige of Italian Americans and their ethnic heritage (Hall, 1983). In the Bensonhurst "media spectacle", however, there was a cast of disreputable Italian American characters such as Guidos and *cugines, wiseguys* and mafiosi, *feral youth* and, perhaps most prominently, racists. As an ethnic group, Italian Americans were accorded a "cultural deficiency" in contradistinction to the mainstream and, in essays by Grizzutti-Harrison, DeMarco-Torgovnick, and Wiseman, to a "model minority" (Brodkin, 1998: 150). The construction of a spoiled ethnic identity featured an incompatibility with the basic moral assumptions of a liberal society.

The Bensonhurst media spectacle also revisited the historical problem of Italian American racial positioning. Identifying Italian Americans by their nationality has historically signified that [they] were "less than white" (Barrett and Roediger, 1999: 146). As Brodkin (1998: 55) suggests in a study of American Jewish ethnic and racial identity, "nonwhite racial assignment" seems to be a function of what the group happens to be "doing" at the time. The Bensonhurst case suggests that Italian Americans run the risk of acting nonwhite when they remain in the inner city, oppose school, and cultivate a tough street code, a risk that may be enhanced for Italian Americans who are dark-skinned. Historically, Brodkin (58) observes that "Italian culture is not prefiguratively white, in the way Jewish culture which [Nathan] Glazer has described as like Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture in valuing individualism and ambition-is".

Bensonhurst Italian Americans aggressively identified themselves in public displays as "white", often submerging their nationality background. They believed that they were acting white by expressing hostility toward blacks along racial lines. Thus, the watermelons brandished at Black protest marchers by Bensonhurst residents represented a preference for American racial symbolism; the corruption of the Italian word for eggplant, "mulignan", is commonly used by Italian Americans within the group as a racial epithet for Blacks.

However, the media narrative not only foregrounded nationality but also blurred racial boundaries. Racial ambiguity is suggested in allusions to Bensonhurst Italian Americans as the "white tribe" (George, 1989) and "the other white New York" (Stone, 1989). Italian American teenagers were actually portrayed as having crossed over the racial boundary. As "white homeboys"

(George, 1989) and "feral youth" (Roberts, 1990), they were slotted into categories that designated Black and Latino youth. The conferring of an "underclass" status (Laurino, 1989) further solidified a nonwhite profile, referencing Italian American teenagers to the stereotypes of urban fear and danger typically reserved for African Americans and Latinos (Miller and Levin, 1998: 230)." Ironically, this darkening of Italian Americans undermined the scenario of a "racial killing".

One of the ways "borderline whites" have qualified for whiteness has been to demonstrate hostility toward nonwhites (Frye, 1998: 231; Barrett and Roediger,1999: 152). To this extent, Bensonhurst Italian Americans were following a historical script for racial inclusion. However, it appears that this time, the storyline included a cruel twist. It was disconcerting enough to be censured as "racists" for doing the dirty work of whiteness in "the larger American racial discourse" (Brodkin: 151). Racial belligerence resulted in having their racial credentials questioned.

It is likely that the identity crisis occasioned by the Bensonhurst incident is conditional for a particular expression of Italian American ethnicity, a development associated with the urban enclave. An artifact of immigrant adaptation to the city, enclave ethnicity has social and moral features that are incompatible with mainstream "liberal" culture (Rieder. 1985). In this form, ethnicity is less "symbolic" and "optional" (Waters, 1990) than "primordial" and "thick" (Cornell and Hartmann, 1998: 77). From a mainstream perspective, Italian American group life has historically been regarded as "culturally deficient" and even pathological (Brodkin, 1998: 150). It has never been platable within the cultural mainstream, including the establishment media, until it has been sufficiently commodified, that is, until the middle class was able to buy into a symbolic ethnic experience. Commodification has been predicated on the exodus of Italian Americans themselves for mainstream settings and the eclipse of enclave institutions (Tricarico, 1984b: 156-167).

In New York City, historic Italian American enclaves have increasingly been packaged for the cultural consumption of the affluent and cosmpolitan. In 1974, the Lower East Side/Mulberry Street Italian American neighborhood was designated by the New York City Planning Commission as the city's official "Little Italy"; this landmark status enshrined a restaurant economy as the symbol of Italian American life at the very moment that the neighborhood was being absorbed by Chinatown. The ongoing gentrification of downtown Manhattan has more recently spawned a real estate concoction called NOLITA, an acronym that stands for "North of Little Italy" (it is actually within the limits of the historic ethnic community). The name attempts to capitalize on the cachet of the SoHo development in the 1970s (acronyms are the nomenclature of gentrification in lower Manhattan) in order "to attract a young and trendsetting clientele of artists and professionals"; with upscale newcomers poised to inherit the neighborhood, an article in The *New York Times* real estate section described the residual Italian American population as a residential amenity (Cohen, 1998). Although historic downtown neighborhoods may soon have more Italian restaurants than Italian Americans, media culture can perhaps stand in for a neighborhood culture:

Grand Ticino, the homey Italian restaurant featured in "Moonstruck" (1987), is on Thompson Street, a couple of blocks below the park. This is where Danny Aiello proposed to Cher, and where Olympia Dukakis arrived for dinner alone... (Gates,

Unlike ethnically depopulated and gentrified Manhattan neighborhoods like the South (Greenwich) Village and "Little Italy", "a living Italian neighborhood" (O'Neill, 1991) in Bensonhurst was not available as a commodified and symbolic enclave experience. Through the 1980s, the communal character of Bensonhurst reflected the working class and ethnic strategies of a large and dense Italian

American population. The *otherness* and deviance attributed to Bensonhurst by the establishment media was fundamentally a response to these urban strategies which Suttles (1968) locates as the core of a "defended neighborhood". In this scenario, a "moral order" in Bensonhurst was structured by the interplay of ethnicity, race and class within segmented urban spaces; "Greater Bensonhurst" was itself segmented into myriad "defended neighborhoods" with units as small as the block. Within these spatial units, insiders are defined as relatively trustworthy and outsiders are either superfluous or threatening. Blacks were threatening in Bensonhurst primarily because of the acceptance of racial discourses. Racial threat had an immediacy because demographic shifts portended integration and even succession by nonwhites (Green et al., 1998). Racial belligerence was confined to an element of the community that was both structurally vulnerable (e.g., unemployment or underemployment). This vulnerability promoted a "turf" consciousness, as competition for scarce resources (e.g., "respect") was centered on the locality; thus, young males with little mainstream social capital served as the principal agents of a "defended neighborhood" culture.

Italian American neighborhoods have historically played a "middleman" role in the "racial discourse" of New York City They have created a strategic buffer between more affluent and educated whites intent on reclaiming the inner city and low status Blacks and Latinos. They have done this by stabilizing real estate values and by discouraging predatory street behavior. "Street work" has been the specialized role of tough Italian American youth, backed up the Mafia (Tricarico, 1984b: 67-69). Jonathan Rieder's study of Canarsie (1985) in the 1980s noted that Italian Americans served as "Jewish muscle" in a neighborhood that was experiencing racial succession; this allowed Jewish Americans to resolve the contradictions between opposition to racial integration and a signature liberalism, although a tough street response eventually emerged with the formation of the Jewish Defense League. Artists and incubating professionals *(yuppies)* moving into the South Village in the 1970s appreciated the vigilance of cornerboys, without actually condoning physical violence (Tricarico, 1984:102-111). Although it occasionally posed problems for newcomers, the "street work" of Italian American cornerboys has made gritty inner city neighborhoods safe for gentrification. In contrast to areas like the South Village which have locational or architectural significance, Bensonhurst held virtually no appeal for bohemians or gentry. Its peripheral status to the material and social concerns of strategic urban actors may have facilitated a moral repositioning of Italian Americans, in particular the criminalization of "Guido".[8]

Nevertheless, the Bensonhurst "media spectacle" holds out the possibility that the *otherness* and deviance associated with the urban Italian American neighborhood can be generalized to Italian American ethnicity. As this media episode suggests, the "discursive reserve" of stereotypes that stigmatize Italian Americans lies just below the surface of American popular culture. Because it activated stereotypes of a "thick" and deviant ethnicity, the Bensonhurst incident may have occasioned a major setback for a mainstream identity development. Indeed, assimilated Italian Americans may have been astounded by the recrudescence of public discourse that, after all these years, portrays Italian Americans as a stigmatized other (i.e., an "underclass" that is "not yet white").

These characterizations would seem to preempt inclusion in a "dominant group ethnicity". They also pose status dilemmas for a mainstream "symbolic" ethnicity (Gans,1999). Ethnicity is not always available "how and when it suits" the individual (Royce, 1982: 3). Under certain circumstances, ethnic identity can be invoked by powerful others; ethnic meanings can be elaborated to "suit" *their* purposes, which may include stigmatization. Although instrumental exploitation of Italian Americans (e.g., as "dago" labor) may no longer be prevalent, this does not preclude "expressive depreciation" (Suarez-Orozco, 1987). Thus, the Bensonhurst "media spectacle" created an external boundary of invidious

cultural and moral distinctions. Representations of Italian Americans in the print media in response to the Bensonhurst incident reveal that the "ways in which a person is, or wishes to be, known by certain others" can become highly politicized under certain kinds of "circumstances" (Cohen, 1993: 195-197). "Post-modern" ethnicity appears to be "contested terrain"; the construction of ethnic identity has to contend with media images and discourses that have a tacit ideological character (Kellner, 1995: 2-3). Audiences "may resist the dominant meanings and messages ... and use their culture to empower themselves and to invent their own meanings, identities, and forms of life" (Kellner: 3). For mainstream Italian Americans, then, ethnic identity construction has involved the manipulation of themes that can be reconciled with an upgraded socioeconomic status (Tricarico, 1984a). Media representations remain "part of the world they encounter, part of what others say they are, and therefore part of the weight they carry" (Comell and Hartmann, 1998: 184). In particular, the media have the power to effect the "reproduction" of existing prejudices and stereotypes in the popular culture (Ferguson, 1998: 61). With so much at stake, media culture will remain a prime venue for identity politics, ethnic and otherwise, in a "post-modern" societv".

NOTES

1. Juliet Schor *(1998)* argues quite convincingly that the popular cultural mainstream in America is now represented by the taste preferences of the *tipper* middle class. The *New York Times* articles on the subject of Bensonhurst have to be understood in relation to advertisements elsewhere in the paper for Armani suits and Rolex watches.

2. A study by Pinderhughes (1997) of Italian American teenagers in a turf-related gang in the Kings Highway section of southern Brooklyn offers a graphic depiction of racial dynamics at street-level. While he is correct to emphasize that the gang was supported by community norms and ideology, it can not be inferred that racism and racial violence define a dominant moral posture in the community.

3. George, an African-American who is an expert on Black popular culture, was playing with the symbolism of the pizzeria as it figured in both the Howard Beach racial killing in *1986* and Spike Lee's response to that incident in the film *Do The Right Thing.* The Lee film subsequently became a frame of reference for events in Bensonhurst, and Lee himself made inferences as a guest columnist for the The *Daily News.*

4. Favorable characterizations of Italian Americans (e.g., as "hardworking") were overwhelmed by negative associations (see Freitag, *1989).* Recent identity development on the part of Italian Americans involves a displacement of negative images associated with a pariah immigrant group by images compatible with mainstream, upscale status (see Tricarico, 1986).

5. One of the more infamous incidents was the sexual assault of a female jogger (routinely identified as an "investment banker") in Central Park by a "wilding" mob of Black and Hispanic teenagers (see Stein, 1990; Pinderhughes, 1997). Fuel was added to the fire with random needle attacks on pedestrians in Manhattan neighborhoods.

6. Press accounts did not acknowledge the appropriation of gangster imagery in both Black and Hispanic youth culture, in the form of the "gangsta" and "hood" personas respectively (Stein, 1989; Roberts, 1990).

7. Italian American youth in the city's neighborhoods have historically developed a street culture organized around a sense of place, or turf, and featuring both the pose and substance of aggression. It appears especially more recently, to have been influenced by Black and Hispanic youth culture on the level of style (see Tricarico, 1991).

8. Artists and "bohemians" have historically found Italian American neighborhoods in the city appealing. The area below Washington Square Park, for example, afforded inexpensive housing and restaurants in the 1950s, and again in the 1960s and 1970s with the development of the Sollo artists' community. In the 1970s, the first wave of newcomers who were typically in their twenties and early thirties and incubating professional careers were also drawn by the belief that Italian neighborhoods were relatively free of street crime. Moreover, they evidenced little moral conflict over how neighborhood peace was secured. Gentrification did not displace restaurants and shops that were able to stage a co modified ethnic experience suitable for cosmopolitan residents and visitors *without* a working class ethnic community (see Tricarico, 1984b).

9. George Will used his column in the *Washington Post* (1993) to belittle the idea that affirmative action was needed at the City University of New York to educate "Dumb Guys Named Guido". Italian American politicians conspicuously resorted to ethnic identity politics to aid the electoral causes of Italian American candidates in 1998. In particular, Mayor Giuliani issued a complaint at a news conference about "a pattern" of anti-Italian American slurs which was followed by a challenge: "Italian Americans have to stand up, they have to say they're not going to put up with this" (Lambert, 1998).

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