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History 91

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The mass lynching of Italians in 1891 New Orleans:
Marking Italians as racially “Dago”

This paper contextualizes the 1891 mass lynching of Italians in New Orleans as a moment in which Italians in New Orleans are marked as racially “Dago.” This paper draws from historical scholarship on race and nativism to explore how the lynching manifested racial, and to a smaller degree nativist, prejudice towards Italians from everyday mindsets in New Orleans at the time.

On Saturday, March 14, 1891 Pasquale Corte, the Italian Consul in New Orleans, sent an urgent telegraph to his superior in Washington, D.C. Rendered in English by the U.S. State Department the telegram read: “Mob led by members of the Committee of Fifty took possession of jail; killed eleven prisoners; three Italians, others naturalized. I hold mayor responsible. Fear further murders. I am also in great danger. Reports follow.” Consul Corte’s telegram clearly expressed his fear after the lynching, a vendetta for the murder of Police Chief Hennessy, that persons of Italian origin, including himself, were in danger in the city. His diplomatic responsibility explains his focus on the victims’ nationality. Corte was confident that the leaders of the lynch mob were members of the city council appointed vigilance committee, referred to as the Committee of Fifty, designed to eliminate vendetta societies in New Orleans. Ultimately, Consul Corte blamed government officials; he held New Orleans’ Mayor Joseph A. Shakespeare responsible for the actions of the mob. Consul Corte escaped danger. No more murders ensued. The violence that occurred that morning in broad daylight, however, left Consul Corte fearing for his life and for the safety

of the Italian community in New Orleans. The “mob led by members of the Committee of Fifty” had violently lynched eleven men, all of who were considered racially “Italian.” Jim Caruso, one of the eleven Italians, had been shot at least forty-two times. Another victim of the mob, Emmanuele Polizzi was hung four times before he finally died. This brutality seems to exceed any Victorian era levelheaded pursuit for justice.

Two days after the lynching the governor of Louisiana, Francis T. Nicholls, sent the United States Secretary of State James G. Blaine a telegram explaining that all was now quiet in New Orleans, “the recent action was directed against particular individuals; their race or nationality was not a factor in the disturbance.” The Governor’s telegram belies the brutal and excessive violence of the lynching by representing the vengeful murders as a “recent action” or “disturbance.” His explanation that race and nationality are not involved does not hold true to the fear Consul Corte had for his life and the lives of members of the Italian community in New Orleans. If the lynching was just a “disturbance” directed against “particular individuals,” why was Corte afraid? The 1891 New Orleans mass lynching of eleven Italians was racial violence that manifested everyday racist attitudes towards Italian immigrants. The racial violence was in part motivated by political and economic gains from the oppression of the Italian community.

Between the years 1880-1992 lynch mobs murdered 2,805 victims. The overwhelming majority of the lynch victims were African-American.¹ The Italian victims are some of the almost 300 “white” persons lynched. This paper suggests that a significant portion of New Orleans society of 1891 did not consider Italians white, so much as they perceived Italians as “Dago,” a derogatory term that marked Italians as racially inferior to whites and foreign.

This paper is situated in a scholarly conversation about race, nativism, and lynching. Thomas C. Holt argues that historians need to link the everyday individual level to the social level in order to understand the historical markers of race with ultimately the goal to end racism.² Martha Hodes addresses the nuances of racial marking in different regional and cultural contexts and examines the 1890 census to reveal the “pretension to measurable categories of race and to fraction-free whiteness.”³ Hodes’ scholarship demonstrates that in 1891 whiteness was the departing point from which all other racial categories were delineated starting with black and moving to increasingly complicated racial identities.

David Roediger identifies race as a “category into which the social and intellectual structures of the United States placed new immigrants” in his book *Working Towards Whiteness*⁴. This paper explores the process by which the Italian immigrants of New Orleans were placed into such racial categories. Roediger presents a narrative of what it was like to “live in between” the stark racial binaries of 1890-1945. In *Whiteness of a Different Color* Matthew Jacobsen argues that Roediger’s study of whiteness fails in two important respects. Similarly to Roediger, in an analysis of the lynching of five Italian immigrants in rural Louisiana in 1899, Peter Vellon asserts the racial “between status” Italian’s immigrants were placed into.⁵ Vellon argues that the “between” white and black racial status placed on Italians “licensed white southerners to employ the racial tool of lynching to control Italians, as they had so often with African Americans.”⁶

Roediger explains race as an economic factor and disregards the longer history of race in the United States. Jacobsen follows in Roediger’s footsteps, but explores the longer history of “glacial movements” of racial categories vis-a-vis whiteness in the United States.

Jacobsen also departs from Roediger's precedent when he moves beyond an economic explanation to include a political and social explanation. Jacobsen recasts "the saga of European immigration and assimilation in the United States as a racial odyssey."⁷ Jacobsen identifies race as both a "public fiction," in other words a "mode of perception contingent upon the circumstances of the moment," and as a "kind of social currency" that results from and acts to organize relationships of power. The identification of race as a "social currency" is similar to Roediger's conception of a "psychological wage" of whiteness. Jacobson asserts that race in the history of the United States has been fashioned by two forces one of which is economic and the other political -- capitalism and republicanism, respectively.⁸ Both of these forces, capitalism and republicanism, are at stake with the conceptions and perceptions of race with regards to the Italian immigrants who were lynched in New Orleans in 1891.

John Higham argues that the initial enmity toward Italian immigrants "fastened on stereotyped traits." Higham writes, somewhat ironically, "Wherever [Italians] went a distinctive sobriquet followed them. 'You don't call ... an Italian a white man?' a West Coast construction boss was asked. 'No, sir,' he answered, 'an Italian is a Dago.'⁹ Through Higham's scholarship, the derogatory term "Dago" becomes a term steeped in race and immigration; it is associated with "stereotyped traits."

The paper first presents a narrative of the lynching. Then, the paper examines the ways in which Italian racial classification and perception were constructed in 1891 New Orleans. It proceeds to analyze language in the press and focuses on the different discourses of civilization and how they were employed to legitimize or criticize the lynching. The paper then identifies the spectacle of the lynching and presents the

ramifications of understanding the lynching as performance. It goes on to explain the relevance of nativism. After presenting the economic and political aspects of the lynching the paper closes by returning to nativism to look at the comparisons that were made between excluded Chinese immigrants and the Italian immigrants.

Issues of race and ethnicity did indeed motivate the lynching of the eleven Italians on the Saturday morning in 1891. The events that culminated in the lynching began several months earlier when a popular New Orleans Chief of Police was shot. On the evening of October 15th 1890 several unidentified assailants shot Police Chief David C. Hennessy while he was on his way home to 275 Girod Street. He was a teetotaler in a city of alcohol who lived with his mother in a working class neighborhood sometimes referred to as a slum. Hennessy's friend, Bill O'Connor, a captain in the Boylan Protective Police, a private police agency, who had dined with Hennessy that night and was nearby when Hennessy was shot, told reporters later that night, "Bending over the Chief I said to him: 'Who gave it to you Dave?' He replied, 'Put your ear down here.' As I bent down again, he whispered the word 'Dagoes'."¹⁰ Hennessy lived for nine hours. In Charity Hospital, where Hennessy was being kept alive, Mayor Shakespeare ordered the police force "Scour the whole neighborhood! Arrest every Italian you come across, if necessary, and scour it again tomorrow morning as soon as there is daylight enough. Get all the men you need."¹¹ More than one hundred and fifty Italian males were arrested within a day of Hennessy's death. Arrests continued until, according to Robert Marr's history of the event published in 1891, the "parish prison was fairly gorged with Italians."¹² At the turn of the twentieth century there was a steady increase in the number of foreign-born Italian residents in New Orleans:

in 1880 the population was 1,995, by 1890 there were 3,622 foreign-born Italians residing in New Orleans; the trend continued and by 1910 the number had reached 8,066.¹³

The city reacted intensely to the murder of their stalwart police chief. Hennessy had gained the attention of the national media in 1881 when he arrested the Sicilian bandit Guiseppe Esposito, who was living in hiding from Italian authorities under an alias in New Orleans. Hennessy had a proven track record of good police work. He was in charge of the private police force organized by the Farrell Detective Agency that was praised for doing an exemplary job to maintain order for the New Orleans World Fair of 1884-1885. As part of his reform policies of his second election Mayor Shakespeare appointed Hennessy as Police Chief in 1888.

Hennessy's murder prompted anxiety about safety from the mafia. As much as the city was sad to have lost, as the local *New York Times* correspondent in New Orleans identified Hennessey, "one of the best-known men in the community...[a man who] was naturally intrepid, courageous, and sagacious" the anxiety and fear was also toward the threat of the vendetta societies infighting now turned to Americans; Hennessy's murder was identified in the *New York Times* as the "first instance" of the vendetta in New Orleans in which "an American has been the victim."¹⁴ O'Connor's statement kindled racist and nativist ideas and the city quickly blamed the Italians for the murder of Hennessey.

On November 20th 1890 a grand jury indicted Peter Natali, Antonio Scaffidi, Antonio Bagnetto, Manuel Politz (Emmanuele Polizzi), Antonio Marchesi, Pietro Monasterio, Bastian Incardona, Salvatore Sincere, Loretto Comitz, Charles Traina, and Charles Pietza for murder and shooting with intent to kill. Joseph P. Macheca, James and John Caruso, Charles Matranga, Rocco Geraci, Charles Patorno, Frank Romero, and Gaspare Marchesi, the child of

Antonio Marchesi, were indicted on two counts as accessories before the fact.¹⁵ The court documents from the trial are not extant. However, newspapers like *The Times-Daily* and the *Daily Picayune*, and the narrative of the Hennessy case in the 1891 *American Law Review* covered the activity of the trial. The prosecution's evidence was paltry and circumstantial. The fact that some of the indicted defendants lived near Hennessy or that they moved close to his house in the months before the murder was taken to establish that there was a stiletto conspiracy to murder Hennessy. Witnesses identified Joseph Macheca as the man who used a fake name to rent the shanty across from Hennessy's home, in which Monasterio lived.¹⁶ The evidence primarily consisted of witness testimony. The irony was that there was no witness to the actual shooting. No witness saw Hennessy's murder.

On March 13 at 3pm the jury delivered a verdict of not guilty for Incardona, Matranga, Bagnetto, the two Marchesi and Macheca. The court declared a mistrial for Scaffidi, Politz, and Monasterio. Despite the not guilty verdict all of the men were taken back to the prison because of a legal technicality and disorganization. The men apparently had yet to be tried for the second indictment.

A segment of white nativist New Orleanians reacted to the verdict with indignation. The city was angry and all throughout the city "threats of lynchings were heard."¹⁷ Two meetings were held on March 13 to plan and arrange for a remedy to the injustice of the verdicts. The "call" to action, which appeared in the morning papers the next day, was drawn up in the second meeting. The call read "Mass Meeting! All good citizens are invited to attend a mass meeting on Saturday, March 14, at ten o'clock, to take steps to remedy the failure of justice in the Hennessy case. Come prepared for action."¹⁸ By 10:15 the speeches of the meeting ended and within ten minutes the mob assailed the parish prison. The short

duration of the meeting, which lasted only fifteen minutes, demonstrates that the leaders had no intention of simply organizing for a rally or protest, but that instead intended to gather a mob for action. The crowd whistled and jeered “Who Killa da Chief?”¹⁹ John C. Wickliffe, one of the orators at the meeting, and three other men guarded the entrance to the prison to admit only men with weapons.

Of the nineteen Italians in the prison for Hennessy’s murder eleven were lynched. Macheca, Scaffidi, and Antonio Marchesi hid together and were shot by one group of the mob. Geraci, Monasterio, Traina, James Caruso, Romero, and Comitz retreated to the woman’s section of the prison and were all shot by another squad. The mob took Bagnetto from the women’s area of the prison and hung him on a tree in front of the prison. Members of the mob dragged Politz out from under a staircase and hung him from a lamppost. On the first try the hang rope broke. On the next two tries, Politz managed to climb up the rope. Finally, members of the mob tied his hands and he finally suffocated on the fourth try. The crowd cheered at Politz’s hanging and rushed to his body to tear his clothing off to divide up as souvenirs.²⁰ The violence was brutal and excessive. James Caruso was shot at least forty two times. By 11 a.m. the violence was done. The mob marched back to the Henry Clay statue greeted by cheers from the ladies and children on the balconies of department stores on Claiborne Avenue. According to both *Harper’s Weekly* and the 1891 *American Law Review’s* summary of “The New Orleans Mafia Case” the crowd then dispersed quietly.

In contrast, in a letter to Baron Fava dated the day after the lynching, March 15, 1891, Consul Corte wrote that after the lynching the crowd headed for an Italian

neighborhood. “Three colored men” attacked Consul Corte as he returned to his consulate from the prison. Corte wrote,

“A moment later Mr. Papini, the clerk of the consulate, made his appearance, pale and greatly frightened, and told me that he had heard the crowd raise the cry of “Kill the Italian!” in consequence of which he had been obliged to take refuge in a store. The crowd now started for Poydras Market, which is almost entirely inhabited by Italians...”

In the letter to Baron Fava, Consul Corte recounted the idle lack of concern shown by the Governor and Mayor. During the lynching, city and state officials stood idly by.

Governor Nicholls lied in his telegram; race and nationality played a most significant role in the “disturbance.” The allegation that the murderers of Chief of Police Hennessey were Italian was never substantiated. There was no guilty verdict for any of the eleven men lynched. Ultimately, the only evidence that the mob needed for the guilt of the eleven men they vengefully lynched was their Italian ancestry.

Race is and was a cultural construction. David Roediger identifies race as a “category into which the social and intellectual structures of the United States placed new immigrants.”²¹ The men who were lynched were first and second generation Italian immigrants. As new immigrants they had been placed into a racial category outside of the black-white binary. In 1891 people understood race as a conflation of biological traits (a person’s physical morphology) and cultural traits (language etc.).²² Mathew Jacobson argues that race has little to do with biology but instead “resides in politics and culture.”²³ Race is a category that is in dialogue with politics and culture.

The racial stereotype of Italians, and especially Sicilians, as “Dagos” that permeated everyday life during the 1890s functioned to support the larger social, cultural, and political forces that sponsored and condoned the brutal spectacle of the lynching. The

lynching was in many ways a permutation of the same kind of thinking and acting that condoned and employed the term “dago” to demean the southern Italian immigrants, often Sicilians, as knife-wielding mafia criminals who couldn’t speak English, and had neither the ability nor the desire to assimilate. The derogatory term “dago” came to label the stereotyped Italian racial category. The origins of the term were contested even in 1890. Any fixed definition of the term “dago” is perhaps unreasonable because it was a dynamic imagined stereotype. A New Orleans newspaper article written five years after the lynching entitled “The Chicago fruit stall men object to being called dago” offered its understanding of the history of the slur. About thirty or forty years before 1896, when the article appeared in *The Daily Picayune*, “dago” was a term used as a synonym for “rat,” or one who takes the place of a striker in work requiring skill and experience.” The article explained, “In the beginning of the century ‘dago’ meant small shopkeepers, ‘bumboat’ people, who supply sailors with fruits, bread, butter and other articles.” A particularly racist article in the journal *The Popular Science Monthly*, which presented the problem “What shall we do with the ‘Dago’?” explains that the word “dago” is a “corruption of hidalgos, which though Spanish and not an Italian word, once came to be sneeringly applied to a foreigner of Latin Europe out of his element.”²⁴ The term hidalgo, which originally meant a Spanish gentleman, was corrupted into “Dago” and by the work of racist ideology became loaded with negative meaning. “Dago” implied placement at the lower end of civilization and a certain darkness of skin. It was a racial category that was dissociated from whiteness as a subordinate.

The term “Dago” functioned similarly as “Negro” to reinforce white supremacy and oppress the “other” on racial terms. “Dago” permeated throughout the American

vernacular. Even the man who would soon become president referred to Italian diplomats as “dagos.” In a letter to a family member Theodore Roosevelt wrote on March 21st 1891 that on Monday “various dago diplomats were present” at diner. They were “all much wrought up by the lynching of the Italians in New Orleans.” Roosevelt presented his take on the lynching in New Orleans in the letter: “Personally I think it rather a good thing and said so.” Roosevelt’s opinion was in keeping with his ideas in *The Winning of the West*, his four-volume history of the crafting of the white masculine American race in the eighteenth-century American West.²⁵ In *The Winning of the West*, Roosevelt claimed the descent and distinction of the American race from the English race. In *The Winning of the West* the enemy of the manly white American is the savage Native American; “negroes” could live peacefully with the superior civilized white American race. Roosevelt then might have envisioned the “Dagoes” in New Orleans as a stand-in for the Indians in his narrative understanding of the national identity of his white manly Americans as the victors in the race battle of the frontier. Roosevelt would have thought of the leaders of the lynch mob as akin to cowboys that demonstrated their heroic masculinity by fighting savage Indians.²⁶

Roosevelt’s heinous reaction to the lynching was all too common. In an interview with the *New York Times*, John P. Richardson, a New Orleans “merchant prince” whose dry goods house amassed sales of \$1.2 million annually, commented, “the lynching in New Orleans Saturday is just the thing that should have occurred.”²⁷ Five times in his two-paragraph justification of the lynching, Richardson used the word mafia to characterize a cultural trait of the Italian race. Mafia-ness operated in a racial way to categorize Italians, and Sicilians, in particular, as biologically and culturally prone to violence. Because they

were descendants of members of violent society in Italy they brought those imagined traits of mafia-ness with them to New Orleans.

The idea of mafia-ness as a racial trait is embedded in “The Committee of Fifty’s Open Letter to All Italian-Americans, October 23, 1890.” The committee of fifty was organized at Mayor Shakespeare’s behest to eradicate the “mafia” presence in New Orleans. The letter drew an implicit connection between guilt and mafia-ness to race. In this historical context, the mafia was considered foreign. The idea of the mafia as the result of racial characteristics of “sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and thieves” made it a concept that was used to do the work of racial ideology. The Committee of Fifty’s letter stated, “We believe that the great majority among you are honest, industrious, and good citizens, and abhor crimes as much as we do.” Clearly, the Italians were considered different from the “us” who wrote the letter. The prompt of the letter to “send us the names and history (so far as you know it) of every bad man, every criminal, and every suspected person of your race in the city or vicinity” is less opaquely racist. The criminals or suspects can only be Italian and being a member of the Italian race is the first step towards being a suspect. The Committee of Fifty racially associated being Italian with being a murderer.

Italian diplomats were outraged by the open letter to the New Orleans Italian community. After reading in the New York press that the Committee of Fifty declared, “it would proceed to extreme and harsh measures, and by summary means without process of law, means which might strike the innocent as well as the guilty,” the Italian Assistant Secretary of State Damiani asserted the right of the Italian Ambassador in Washington, Baron Fava, to remind the authorities in New Orleans of the “sentiments of justice and

humanity which our conationals have the right to expect, and which the authorities of New Orleans seem inclined to violate.”²⁸

Several months later, after the murder of Chief Hennessey sixty-one names appeared affixed to the advertisement for a “Mass Meeting!” which appeared in *The Daily Picayune* on Saturday March 14, 1891. These men bear a substantial part of the burden of responsibility in every legal sense for the brutal murders of eleven innocent Italians later that morning. Edgar H. Farrar’s name appears on the call for a “Mass Meeting!” printed in several New Orleans newspapers the day before, and again the morning of, the lynching. The contextualization of one name, Edgar H. Farrar, gives a sense of the position some of these sixty-one men as individuals, who became sponsors of the lynching, occupied in terms of the societal level. Farrar was a successful lawyer and national figure. He served as the president of the American Bar Association, and was a trustee of Tulane University, the primary educational institution at the time in the state.²⁹ His obituary, published in 1922, connected Farrar to the crescent city lynching. “For years Mr. Farrar was chairman of the Executive Committee of 100 to reform municipal government in New Orleans, and was chairman of the Committee of Safety formed to prosecute the assassins of Chief of Police David Hennessey.”³⁰ The obituary mentioned a “Committee of Safety,” also known as the “Committee of Fifty.” Farrar, like a sizable portion of the New Orleans elite, was proud to sponsor and participate in the mob lynching.

The “Mass Meeting” document is entrenched in a discourse of civilization that functions similarly to reproduce white supremacy. Many newspapers presented the lynching as a “civilized” act. The *Texas Dallas Paper* painted the violence as an orderly civilized affair: “the work of blood was accomplished without unnecessary disorder... It

was not an unruly midnight mob. It was simply a sullen determined body of citizens who took in their own hands what justice had ignominiously failed to do.”³¹ This description of a “body of citizens” strikingly resembles the collection of “good citizens” that the “Mass Meeting!” advertisement called to action. The “Mass Meeting!” advertisement reveals a society in which it is completely reasonable for “good citizens” to organize a mass meeting that they have every intention of steering towards violent action “to take steps to remedy the failure of justice.”³² Frankly, the violent actions of the mob were not about justice. They were about racism and oppression. Similarly, it has been convincingly argued that the lynching of black men for allegedly raping or infringing on the sexuality of white women was never about justice; it was about economic and political oppression of blacks and the reproduction of white supremacy.³³ The newspaper advertisement informed readers about the mass meeting; persuaded them to come; and served to validate the actions of the mob before they took place. The logic of the advertisement was if you are a “good citizen” you are “invited” to participate. Further, readers are told to “come prepared for action.” This logic makes the “mass meeting” into the civic duty of right-minded individuals. This “Mass Meeting” document called the “good citizens” of New Orleans to form the mass meeting, which became the mob that proceeds to lynch eleven Italians, none of whom had been found guilty by law for the murder of Hennessy.

Perhaps more interesting, this characterization of the group of men who participated in the lynching as respectable citizens of New Orleans resembles to some extent the representation of the participants in the lynching found in *L'Italo Americano* editorial. *L'Italo Americano* described the majority of the mob as “the civilized and educated portion of the community” of New Orleans.

The Committee of Fifty did not fail to deliver their own take on the events in the form of their *Report of the committee of fifty citizens on the existence of secret societies of New Orleans* which they published in the *New Orleans Picayune* on May 15, 1891. The report stated that “The Dagoes did it” were the last words of Chief of Police Hennessy. The report suggested that the lynching was “inevitable,” it “followed as the night the day” and the actions of the mob “have been approved by this community and the entire country.” The *Report of the Grand Jury* concludes, “The magnitude of this affair makes it a difficult task to fix guilt upon any number of the participants; in fact, the act seemed to involve the entire people of the parish and city of New Orleans, so profuse is their sympathy and extended their connection with the affair.”

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Public opinion did not unanimously support racial prejudice against Italians nor was it unanimously in favor of violent justice in reaction to the not-guilty verdicts. The morning of the lynching, March 14, 1891, *The Daily Picayune* printed an opinion piece expressing

their desire that the purpose of the mass meeting be kept just and peaceful. Of the utmost concern for the New Orleans newspaper was to keep racial prejudice out of the mass meeting.

Above all things let not this affair be made the theme and occasion for a race war. There is no reason for a prejudice against Italians. Hennessy was doubtless murdered by Italians, but not by the Italians as a race, as a class, or for any race or national object. They happened to be Italians, as they might have been Americans. The outraged law cries out against murderers, whoever they may be, but not against Italians. Let us have no race prejudice in this business.³⁴

The fact that the paper even felt the need to include this article is telling of the racial prejudice against the Italians that had surrounded the Hennessy affair and permeated New Orleans society. However, the article also demonstrates that some readers had neither interest in a violent conflict nor any racial prejudice against Italians. *The Daily Picayune* Saturday paper opinion article, "At the Feet of Clay," about the "Mass Meeting" advertisement conveyed that the paper is disappointed that the "call" did not express the "object of the meeting" but left the intentions of the meeting unclear. The opinion piece was confident that "the object of the meeting is wholly in the interest of peace" as much as justice. The article takes the signature of the prominent 61 names as a guarantee of the peaceful nature of the mass meeting. When the newspaper worried that the meeting would be an occasion for a "race war" it had some examples of violent race conflicts in Louisiana's recent history from which to draw concern. One such conflict was the Colfax Massacre in rural Louisiana in 1873. At the "Battle of Liberty Place" in 1874 white Democrats allied as the Crescent City White League fought against blacks and Republicans in an insurrection against the Reconstruction government in downtown New Orleans.

The opinion article's prompt to keep race out of the actions of the mass meeting renders their confidence in the peaceful nature of the meeting at best suspect and at worst disingenuous. In Consul Pasquale Corte's letter to Ambassador Fava he wrote, "The violent articles which appeared in the newspapers, such as the "Daily States" and the "Delta," which papers, in the name of the Committee of Fifty, announced that a meeting would be held on the following day to take vengeance, left no doubt as to the choice of the means of which it proposed to make use."³⁵ Corte wrote this with hindsight. His understanding that the "Mass Meeting" advertisement meant violence was in sharp contrast to *The Daily Picayune's* opinion that the meeting would remain peaceful. The opinion piece preemptively wiped the newspaper's hands of any blood; they after all expected nothing but a peaceful meeting. It also attempted to avoid another political but race driven violent conflict like the "Battle for Liberty Place" in which there were about a hundred casualties.

The lead spokesman of the meeting incited racial violence against Italians who he thought of as aliens to his community. William S. Parkerson, who was not a member of the Committee of Fifty but whose name appears at the top of the right hand column of signees of the "Mass Meeting" advertisement, led the mob. Parkerson, who had practiced law in New Orleans for a decade by the time of the lynching, was a talented orator. Farrar and Parkerson were both white lawyers who supported and led their "community" to break into the Parish Prison and lynch eleven legally innocent Italian men. In Parkerson's speech to the mob he labeled the entire jury as perjurers and scoundrels. Parkerson posed questions intended to incite the crowd to carry out the lynching. Parkerson asked, "What protection, or assurance of protection, is there left us, when the very head of our police, our chief or police, is assassinated in our very midst by the Mafia Society, and his assassins are

again turned loose on the community?" Parkerson did not include Italians in his conception of his community. He called on the men to "see the murder of D. C. Hennessey vindicated."

The everyday practice of the dynamic ideology of manliness was used to provoke and condone the lynching. Parkerson tied the willingness to "set aside the verdict" to the honor of the mob members' manhood. In the last line of his speech Parkerson bids the "Men and citizens of New Orleans, follow me, I will be your leader!"³⁶ Parkerson embodied the vein of white manliness that valued bold virile leadership, as well as, civilization. He could be admired at as a sign of progress because he was seen as participating in the civic duty of justice. While at the same time that he could be perceived as an exemplar civilized white man he was also a virile and could be looked to as the type of strong man that could reproduce and continue the evolution of the white race. Like Roosevelt, Parkerson imagined manliness as being willing to remedy the failure of justice with violence.

The leaders of the mob took steps to insure violence was carried out against the Italians. *Harper's Weekly* wrote, "W. S. Parkerson, the District Attorney, John C. Wickliffe, and Walter D. Denegre were at the head of the committee." Wickliffe had been the District Attorney in years before the Hennessy Case and the 1891 lynching; he was not the prosecutor in the case. The mob took possession of the parish prison but no more than sixty men were admitted inside because "John C. Wickliffe stood at the broken door." He examined those who tried to enter and, according to *Harper's*, only "if they were armed, and said they meant to use their weapons, they were passed on."³⁷ Only those who were prepared to be violent were admitted entrance into the prison. Spectators remained outside.

The *Harper's Weekly* article almost reenacted the lynching, in the same way a photograph or motion picture would. The descriptive narrative of the article made the lynching present and visceral for readers.³⁸ The article itself disparages Italians and Sicilians, especially of the lower class.³⁹ The edition of *Harper's Weekly* included sketches of the lynching. There is evidence to suggest that the lynching may have been photographed. There is, at least, a photo of the crowd in front of the parish prison after the lynching.⁴⁰ Witnesses to the lynching took souvenirs. The clothing from Politz's body was ripped off his hanging body and taken as souvenirs. The narrative, sketches, photographs, and souvenirs became objects of everyday racism towards the Italians. The sketches of the lynching activity reenact the spectacle for the curious reader. By reenacting the spectacle the sketch condones the racist tones of the lynching. The spectacle of the lynching and the acts of witnessing involved gave social significance to the violence. The spectacle played its own cultural work.⁴¹ Amy Louis Wood discusses how the act of witnessing performed by white southern spectators gave lynching symbolic power to enact and maintain native white domination over people with black skin. The newspaper and magazine coverage of the lynching expanded the participants in the spectacle of the lynching to include everyone who read a story of the lynching or used the word "dago." By engaging with the literary and visual reproductions of the lynching with shared mindsets as the writers and sketch artists a substantial portion of the American public engaged with and participated in the racial, and nativist, thinking that was behind the lynching. The literary and visual spectacles of the lynching created sympathy minimal real sympathy for the victims but instead presented the action of the lynching as a kind of adventure story and ultimately tended to sympathize with the lynch mob.

The lynching of Italians was less about skin color, the pigment of the imagination, than it was about nativism. Though perhaps darker than Anglos the Italians were often identified in official documents of the state as having white skin color. Nativism becomes a relevant idea to understand the xenophobic prejudice towards Italians around the 1890s in New Orleans. John Higham defines racial nativism as a mode of nativism that plays on the sentiment of fear and hatred towards alien (un-American) individuals who do not assimilate. Higham's idea of "nativism" can be understood as the spirit of a certain kind of jingoist prejudice. This jingoist prejudice against the culturally Italian persons deemed "un-American" and stereotyped as "Dagos" suffered from everyday practice of the spirit of nativism.

From an Italian immigrant perspective the lynching was an assassination. According to an editorial in *L'Italo Americano* translated and reprinted in the *New York Times* on March 22, 1891 "political ambition is the true motive of the assassination." What were the connections between race and politics in New Orleans and Louisiana at the time? Native-born whites were concerned with the recent enfranchisement of blacks during Reconstruction and the impact that the new votes would have on politics.⁴² Like other southern states Louisiana had adopted legal segregation of the races and would soon make it practically impossible for blacks to vote. Prominent members of the ethnic community of Italians in New Orleans had clearly gained economic and political clout. In *Vendetta* Richard Gambino asserts that Joseph P. Macheca, one of the eleven men who were lynched, was the most influential Italian-American in New Orleans.

José Martí, the Cuban nationalist, addresses the political motivation behind the racial violence of the lynching. Martí criticized the lynching, and connected it directly to

political rivalries in New Orleans. From Buenos Aires in the summer of 1891 Martí wrote a scathing report of the events of the lynching in which he begins “From this day on no person who has known pity will set foot in New Orleans without horror.”⁴³ Martí was dramatic and poetic. He gets some of his facts wrong; however, his narrative rings truer than most. He wrote, “They called them ‘Dagos,’ a nickname that makes a Sicilian’s blood boil.” Martí wrote that the Italian population of the United States,

“Stood up for [the Italians in New Orleans]; their press denied, as did their prominent men, that there was a *Mafia*, or a *Stiletto*, or a *Stopaliagien* society, or any possibility of proving such a thing... They insisted that the root of this vicious persecution was to be found in the political rivalries, in the determination to intimidate the Italians who would not submit to the will of their persecutors to get them out of New Orleans and out of the polls. They declared that a devilishly political conspiracy was being hatched.”⁴⁴

Martí captures the tragedy of the lynching. He speaks to the spectacle and the witnessing involved in the lynching of the eleven Italians in New Orleans. He ends with the mundane reality of the everyday, the lynching activities take less than an hour and the lawyers and businessmen who participated went on with their Saturdays.

Gambino’s analysis of the motivation behind the lynching insists that the lynching was a means to devastate “the rising economic power and social threat of the Italian community.”⁴⁵ Gambino writes, “By destroying Joseph Macheca, New Orleans’ most prestigious and wealthy Italian, and by persecuting the entire Italian community, the “dagoes” would be put in their place. And Macheca’s very profitable waterfront influence would be taken over by “responsible” citizens, some of whom, ... were principal persecutors of the Italians.”⁴⁶

The editorial in *L’Italo Americano* recasts the discourse of civilization to argue against the lynching. For the Italian authors there is no question that they live in a “civilized

era.” They invested in “civilization” despite the fact that its dominant members have excluded them. They called for Italians to protest the “unworthy and brutal political assassination” with their votes: “Supremacy of the law must be our motto and the only aim of our desire.”⁴⁷

Reworking the discourse of civilization was also simultaneously used as a tool to criticize lynching in the young anti-lynching campaign. In October of 1892 Ida B. Wells similarly inverted the discourse of civilization with regards to justification of lynching of blacks in the pamphlet *Southern Horrors* by recasting black men as the personification of ideal civilized manliness and lynching as a practice that “embodied white men’s lust running amok.”⁴⁸ In the white lynching scenario black men were depicted as uncivilized lustful rapists. Ida B. Wells turned this upside down and “warned that [white] Southern men’s unrestrained lust had spread north and corrupted Northern men’s manliness.”⁴⁹ Unfortunately most whites until after her two British tours in 1893 and 1894 ignored Wells’ arguments inverting the discourse of civilization and the ideas of racial manliness in *Southern Horrors*.⁵⁰

The Italian opinion piece in *L’Italo Americano* failed to go as far as Wells. It did not present the members of the lynch mob as the vendetta society, which would have been a full inversion but instead claimed the moral higher ground. By deciding not to retaliate violently to the assassination of the eleven innocent Italians, the Italian community made themselves into the civilized community who abide by the law.

The mindset of the Committee of Fifty was molded by racial nativism. It concluded that the trial was a disgrace, that the lynching was praiseworthy, and that Italians aren’t capable of being citizens of the United States. The jury delivered no indictments. The

committee recommends the “entire prohibition of immigration from Sicily and lower Italy.” They draw on the nativist precedent of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and compare the southern Italians to the Chinese. The report considers the southern Italians “undesirable citizens” who don’t deserve the “blessings of a freedom and civilization which they are not only unable to appreciate, but which they refuse to understand or accept.” The report reveals that Italian immigrants were thought of as inferior and “other,” like Chinese immigrants. Italian immigrants were racially constructed as unworthy of United States citizenship just as the Chinese had been with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

John P. Richardson, the “merchant prince” interviewed by the *New York Times*, also drew a comparison to the Chinese immigrants: “The Italian colony in New Orleans, which includes possibly a larger number than all the other in the country combined, is a menace to American citizenship and good government. Why, I had rather have a thousand Chinamen than one Italian.” Richardson called Italians “treacherous” and “revengeful” and looks forward to the time when the “Italian colony will be wiped out.”⁵¹

Before Louisiana agriculture leaders encouraged Italians to immigrate to Louisiana in order to fill the severe shortage of labor caused by “the abolition of slavery and the migration of Blacks to the North,” the Plantation owners had successfully used Chinese laborers. The U.S. had encouraged Chinese workers to immigrate earlier in the century, and they had done so in substantial numbers. Employers in the United States employed Chinese workers at low wages and after the Civil War resentment against the Chinese workers grew. In 1871 Chinese laborers dissatisfied with their wages and working conditions broke their contracts and went elsewhere for work.⁵²

Erika Lee argues that by the passage of the first Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 the United States became a “gatekeeping nation” that adopted a more restrictive and exclusionary immigration policy. Chinese exclusion worked “to establish and normalize American gatekeeping” and it altered “the ways in which Americans thought about race and immigration.”⁵³ The new exclusionary policies and the nativist mindset redefined “what it meant to be an “American.”⁵⁴ To be American was not to be a Chinese immigrant nor evidently was it to be an Italian, much less, a Sicilian immigrant. The 1891 lynching of the eleven Italians in New Orleans was situated during what Lee calls the “Exclusion Era.” Italians, like the Chinese, were not included in the new definition of the white American. The Chinese were conflated as alien threats, regardless of citizenship or whether they were native born.⁵⁵ The Italian immigrants, regardless of whether they were native born like Joseph P. Machecha, also became conflated as an alien threat to American civilization. That much is made clear by the activity and discourse surrounding the lynching.

The lynching served more to further racism and nativism than it did to deter Italians from migrating to the United States and New Orleans. In fact the Italian immigrant community in New Orleans continued to grow in the two decades following the lynching. This trend was true nationally as well. In the first two decades of the twentieth century Italy was the largest source country of immigrants (2 million in 1901-1910, and 1.1 million in 1911-1920) to the United States, followed by Russia.⁵⁶ The United States was, however, becoming more of a gated nation. To some extent the 1891 lynching was a reflection of the movement towards an exclusive definition of the American identity. The political trajectory which perhaps began in full with the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, continued with formation of the 1907 legislative commission which ultimately recommended and

helped pass into law the national origins quota system of the 1920's designed to restrict Eastern and Southern European immigration and bar migration from Asia.

The mass lynching of eleven Italians in 1891 embodied racist and nativist attitudes towards Italian immigrants. The lynching was condoned as justice. Government officials denied any connection between race and nationality and the activity of the mob. This denial was unfounded in reality. White New Orleans elites, including Mayor Shakespeare in particular, lumped Italians together as racially "dago" mafia ruffians. The lynching appears to be wave peak in the flow towards the national origins quota system. It was nativist and racist. The geopolitical ramifications of the comparison of the Italians to Chinese immigrants and the fact that Cuban activists and a future president of the United States became commentators on the lynching, makes clear that the same type of racial thinking that the lynching manifested had implications for the political and economic aims of United States imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. Big Stick Diplomacy contrasted a savage to a white civilized man. Based on permutations of racial thinking, the white man became understood as having a burden to police and control regional peoples who were identified as racially inferior, like the Italians in 1891 New Orleans.

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Notes

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- ³⁸ Amy Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle: Witnessing Racial Violence in America, 1890-1940* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina UP, 2009) 73.
- ³⁹ Perhaps the focus on the lower class occurred because Harper’s realized that it had upper-class Italian readers, or more speculatively, the writer may have known and had interacted with upper class Italians and thought of them differently. But the Italians who were lynched were not all lower class.
- ⁴⁰ The Parish Prison, where eleven Italian prisoners were lynched, March 14th, 1891. (From a photograph taken immediately after the event.) 1891. The Historic New Orleans Collection.
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