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The Afro-Italian Question: Are Italians Black or White, A Historical Perspective Race Class and Acceptance in American Society

By Dr. Michael J. Winfield, Sr. | Editor

During the 19th century, nativism emerged as a political stance that favored the interests of native-born or long-established residents over immigrants' interests. This often involved supporting anti-immigration and immigration-restriction measures. Furthermore, race and ethnic identity significantly influenced

NO ITALIANS ALLOWED
On May 28, 1898, council pass a resolution to the effect that parties receiving the contract for paving E. Washington St. shall bind themselves not to employ any Italian labor.

the reception of immigrants entering the United States from the mid to late 19th century. At this time, being American meant being white. However, the new wave of immigrants arriving in America did not resemble the colonial settlers who came as

part of Great Britain's expansion of its empire. (Anbinder 1992) For example, in *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204 (1923), the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that Bhagat Singh Thind, an Indian Sikh man self-identifying as an Aryan, was ineligible for naturalized citizenship in the United States. (Corbin 2021)

In 1919, Thind applied for naturalization under the Naturalization Act of 1906, signed into law by Theodore Roosevelt that revised the Naturalization Act of 1870, which permitted only “free white persons” and “aliens of African nativity and persons of African descent” to attain United States citizenship through naturalization. (Corbin 2021) Thind did not challenge the constitutionality of the racial restrictions. Instead, he attempted to be classified as a “free white person” within the meaning of the Naturalization Act based on the fact that Indians and Europeans share a common descent from Proto-Indo-Europeans. Thind was represented by a fellow Indian American, Sakharam Ganesh Pandit, a California attorney. (Corbin 2021)

The Court unanimously rejected Thind's argument, adding that Thind did not meet a “common sense” definition of white. The ruling stated that Thind could not become a naturalized citizen. The Court concluded that “the term 'Aryan' has to do with linguistic, not physical characteristics. It is reasonably clear that mere resemblance in language, indicating a common linguistic root buried in remotely ancient soil, is inadequate to prove common racial origin.” The litmus test that needed to be passed was a direct connection to the central European white Anglo-Saxon Protestant elites that maintained dominance in American politics. Essentially, they were the ones who determined who was white and who was not. (Corbin 2021)

Furthermore, Nativist sentiments were behind the 1924 Immigration Act, also called the Johnson-Reed Act. This legislation encompassed the Asian Exclusion Act and the National Origins Act. It prohibited immigration from Asia and restricted the influx of immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe. Among the groups of immigrants who were unwelcome and

perceived as neither black nor white were the Italians from Southern Italy. (Okrent 2019)



Italian immigrants in the United States encountered racial oppression and discrimination from the 19th century until the early 20th century. Immigrants from Southern Italy, much like the Irish and Polish, were often not considered white enough and were derogatorily referred to as “white niggers”. (Ignatiev 2012) What is more, during the eugenicist movement in America, eugenicists were highly successful in portraying those considered not “Quite white” to be racially degenerate and biologically inferior, thus incapable of contributing positively to a democratic society. (Wray 2006)

One of the most tragic instances of discrimination against Italian immigrants

took place in the early 20th century, with the case of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Both were Italian immigrants and anarchists who were controversially convicted of murdering Alessandro Berardelli and Frederick Parmenter, a guard and a paymaster, during an armed robbery in Braintree, Massachusetts, on April 15, 1920. (Watson 2007)



On July 14, 1921, with evidence to the contrary, Sacco and Vanzetti were convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to death, with suspicions that anti-Italianism, anti-Catholicism, and anti-anarchist biases heavily influenced the verdict. In essence, they were convicted of being Italian. Seven years later, they were executed in the electric chair at Charlestown State Prison. Racial discrimination against Italians was widespread and not limited to the North. At

the end of the 19th century, a series of public lynchings of Italians drew national attention. (Watson 2007)

However, prejudices appear to have been acceptable in polite circles as well. In response to the New Orleans lynchings, the *New York Times* wrote in an editorial: “These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians, the descendants of bandits and assassins, who have transported to this country the lawless passions, the cut-throat practices, and the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigation. Our own rattlesnakes are as good citizens as them. Lynch law was the only course open to the people of New Orleans to stay the issue of a new license to the Mafia to continue its bloody practices.” All of these beg the question, how did Italians come to be viewed as non-white? What historical circumstances find people of Italian ancestry, mainly from Southern Italy, grouped with people of African descent or those perceived as nonwhite? (Watson 2007)

What is more, in the early part of the 2000s, an interesting conversation arose among Italian scholars as to the notion of

“Africa” as a racial and geographic construct that began in Southern Italy. The origin of Africa, which is used for the African continent, is still the subject of much debate. For example, an urban legend states that the name comes from Italy and is of Italian origin. A possible explanation for this is that some may have associated the name “Africa” with Leo Africanus, an explorer who extensively traveled in Africa and wrote an account of his travels in Italian. He completed this account in 1526, published in 1550 as “Descrittione dell’Africa” (Description of Africa). This book became the most famous and widely quoted European work about Africa. It remained the most important source of European knowledge about West and North Africa for the next four centuries. However, the name by which Leo is known today, Leo Africanus (Leo the African), stems from his reputation for writing the “definitive” European book on Africa. (Brown 1896) That said, scholars generally accept that Africa is a European corruption of “Afuraka” and originates in the Khemtic language. (Akhan 2024)

Moreover, the Etruscans, who dominated the Italic tribes until the small tribe of Romans overthrew them, were depicted as very dark-skinned. (Al-Amin 2013) There is also an argument that the Italian peninsula is the uppermost part of any continuation of Africa proper, with the island of Sicily being African. All that is still up for debate, and it is an academic conversation that probably will not have a resolution anytime soon. (Al-Amin 2013)

The Etruscans of pre-Roman Central and Northern Italy were involved in this nexus of ancient European people. According to Historian Werner Keller, the Etruscans were dark, perhaps black-skinned people with the countenances of Black Africans. Keller states: Long before Rome existed, the Etruscans had already established an empire on Italian soil with big cities, industry, arts and crafts, and worldwide trade. (Al-Amin 2013) However, the general public has been told almost nothing about this and has not been informed of how extensively Etruscan influence may have extended, whether they were similar to other Black northern European tribes, or whether these

relationships extended to the British Isles. (Al-Amin 2013)

What is more, the presence of Black Africans in Sicily is well-documented. Around the same time, the Moors conquered the Iberian Peninsula and took control of Sicily. Most Moors were Black and played a significant role in Sicily's history. In 827 A.D., they established Islamic rule on the island, lasting 250 years. During this period, the Moors had a lasting impact on Sicilian culture, architecture, and language, altering the island's DNA signature over time. (Al-Amin 2013)

In addition, the Moors introduced new agricultural techniques and built impressive structures, such as the Palermo Cathedral. They also established a legacy of tolerance and coexistence among different religions and cultures. However, their presence led to conflict and tension, as European kingdoms viewed them as a constant threat. The Normans regained control of Sicily in 1091 A.D., effectively ending Muslim rule on the island. However, their influence lasted from the initial invasion in 1061 until the surrender of Noto in 1091, marking a significant period

of Norman conquest and rule in Sicily. (Birk 2017)

Due to Frederick II's incentives, the remaining Sicilian Muslims eventually converted to Catholicism. Additionally, some Muslims from Lucera later embraced Catholicism due to oppression on the mainland and were able to reclaim their properties upon returning to Sicily. Throughout the reigns of both Frederick II and his son Manfred, a significant number of Black Muslims were enslaved and brought to farmlands to work as domestic laborers. Subsequently, many of them came to be known as 'Moors.' (Birk 2017)

The One Drop Rule and the Notion of Invisible Blackness

According to one study, the level of African ancestry in European Americans from each state is closely linked to the percentage of African Americans in that state's population. This suggests that the historical mixing of genes, cultural influences, and self-identified ancestry all contribute to the genetic makeup of European Americans. (Bryc, et al. 2015)

What is more, this research demonstrates that the genetic ancestry of

modern individuals living in the United States reflects the legacy of population migrations and interactions over the last several hundred years. The study also reveals the relationship between self-reported identity and genetic African ancestry, shedding light on the complexity of genetic and social consequences of racial categorization, assortative mating, and the impact of notions of “race” on patterns of mating and self-identity in the US. The results provide empirical support that many individuals with partial African and Native American ancestry have integrated into the white community over recent centuries, as evidenced by multiple lines of genetic and historical evidence. (Bryc, et al. 2015) As such, this research challenges the idea that Italians with African ancestry should always identify as African Americans. Instead, it found that individuals may identify more with the majority of their genetic ancestry. This suggests that instead of self-reporting as African Americans determined by a social one-drop rule or “Rule of Hypodescent,” they opted to pass as white, subsequently white-

washing their family history. (Bryc, et al. 2015)

In the 1830s, in the North and South, the concept of a white-looking Black person emerged following the Nat Turner rebellion, fearing that white-looking blacks could use their appearance as a ploy to foment insurrection throughout the anti-bellum South and wreak havoc in the North in places such as Rhode Island where there was a vigorous slave trading business. The concept of the “one-drop rule,” or “invisible blackness,” gradually spread through the South and eventually reached Louisiana shortly after 1900. Over time, the one-drop rule gained legal recognition through a series of court decisions, leading to the social exclusion of many white families who were alleged to have African ancestry. This exclusion seemed to be a result of their association with or defense of black individuals during the Jim Crow era. (Sweet 2005)

However, there are cases where individuals with Black ancestry, despite being able to pass for white, chose instead to present as African American at a time when

it was not beneficial. For example, Walter White, president of the NAACP, was born into a family that seemed Caucasian. White's great-grandmother had six children in the 1830s, and her owner was the future president, William Henry Harrison. When Harrison ran for the White House, he gave four of his slave children to his brother, who then sold them in Virginia to a man from Georgia. Before the Civil War, one of the four children, Marie, White's grandmother, became the concubine of a white doctor named Augustus Ware. Ware eventually started his own Caucasian family while keeping Marie conveniently in the house next door, where she could do his laundry and bear him four children. One of the girls, Madeleine, born in 1863 as the product of a culture of rape during slavery, would be Walter White's mother. (Dyja 2008)

Walter White, as a young man, took pride in his Black heritage and chose not to assimilate into the larger white society to pass as Caucasian. Instead, he used his racial advantage to become a champion for civil rights and justice. On the other hand, Italian Americans, whose racial heritage might be

related to African ancestry in the past, are not categorized as white or black but rather fall into an in-between group. As a result, they often self-identify as white, as indicated by the study. (Bryc, et al. 2015)



The immigrants from Italy who arrived in America in the 19th century brought with them a cultural connection to Africa, evidenced by their genetic makeup and physical appearances bearing the stigma of possible African ancestry and the one-drop rule. The implications range from Italians being Afro-adjacent or Mulatto Scandinavians. The truth always lies somewhere in the middle. Despite racism, discrimination, and mistreatment, Italian Americans now hold influential and prosperous positions in various fields, such as business, education, religion, and politics. In contrast to their arrival in America when

Nativist sentiments were high, today, they are generally accepted as white, much as the Irish and Polish are also accepted as white. Their contributions are integral to the diverse and appealing tapestry of American society, attracting people from other countries to make America their home.

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Sean “P Diddy” Combs: Can He Rise Up from the Ashes or Is He Done?

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Sean ‘Puffy’ Combs, a nickname his childhood friends gave him. As the story goes, Combs earned the moniker because when he got angry or upset, he would “huff and puff,” so it stuck. Combs would later use it as a part of his industry persona. For instance, in his early music credits, with hits like the 1994 remix, he worked on with Chucky Thompson for Jade’s ‘Every Day of the Week.’ Combs also used ‘Puffy’ on Bad Boy’s influential early release of Christopher Wallace, aka the Notorious B.I.G.’s 1994 debut ‘Ready to Die.’ (Setaro 2017)

If recent history is any indication, the origin of his childhood nickname is well-

deserved and fitting. However, the big difference now is that when he becomes angry and upset, his reactions go far beyond mere “huffing and puffing.” To illustrate, ex-girlfriend Cassie Ventura, who had been in a long-term relationship with Combs, filed a lawsuit accusing the mogul of rape, sex trafficking, and physical abuse. Additionally, she alleged that Combs was responsible for the destruction of her then-boyfriend Kid Cudi’s car. (Setaro 2017) Eager to do damage control, Combs and Ventura reached an undisclosed settlement the following day, which led to the dismissal of the lawsuit. (Sisario 2023)



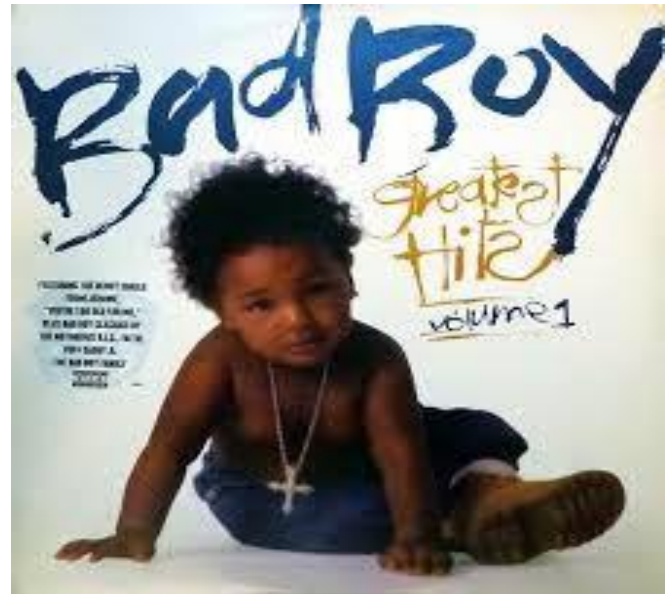
After settling the lawsuit, Combs then went public, passionately denying all accusations as fabricated and made up. Then the unexpected happened, shocking both P Diddy, as he is also known, and the small margin of remaining support. CNN released

leaked surveillance footage showing Combs, or his avatar, physically assaulting Ventura at a hotel in Century City, Los Angeles, back in 2016. This incident was one of the allegations made in the lawsuit. As a response to the horrific video, Combs posted a video apology, crocodile tears and all, on social media, expressing “deep regret” and acknowledging that his actions were “inexcusable. (Sisario 2023)

Nevertheless, with all that has transpired, the public could be seeing the last of Combs for some time if he fails to carry the day at a most crucial time in his life. Armored vehicles and heavily armed Homeland Security Agents recently raided Diddy's homes in Miami, New York, and Los Angeles, possibly in search of evidence to support sex trafficking allegations. (Katersky 2024)

At the end of the day, a person who outwardly seemed to have it all as an accomplished business mogul, who rose from the streets of Harlem and “money-earning Mount Vernon,” has apparently sown the seeds to his own demise. So, what is the next step for citizen Combs? Undoubtedly, he is in

a very precarious situation. What advice would experts who handle high-profile cases like Combs give?



New York-based discrimination attorney Andrew Lieb of Lieb at Law explained to Newsweek that including the entrepreneur's businesses in the lawsuit was a legal obligation. The lawsuit was filed under the Adult Survivors Act, which holds an employer accountable for sexual abuse, along with the perpetrator, as long as the employer had some responsibility or control over the abuser or victim. Lieb also clarified that it would be considered legal malpractice not to have sued the companies and Diddy. Additionally, he noted that naming his organizations removes his ability to force the

organizations to settle for themselves. Still, it doesn't prevent Combs from offering enough money for one massive settlement to include all parties concerned, not unlike a class action suit. (Smith 2023)

While Combs denied all wrongdoing after the allegations were leveled against him, Redwine asserted in the viral video that his reputation was still gravely affected. Lieb told Newsweek that he agrees—but only to a certain extent. "Overall, this lawsuit hurts Diddy's brand, business dealings, and wallet. However, he will plow through it and emerge just fine on the other side after paying Cassie her due," Lieb said. (Smith 2023)

Lieb could very well be right. At this point, Puffy must step back from the scene. Surround himself with top-notch professionals who deal with these crises where one's reputation is seemingly all but damaged beyond repair. He has to trust the professionals to walk him and his career back from the edge of destruction if, in fact, he has one to speak of. In time, he could outlive the news cycle--maybe. However, he could never outlive the events that brought him to such a low point in his life and career. The City

College fiasco from early in his career, where several concertgoers lost their lives, still haunts him.

What is more, he has witnessed the demise of many of his former artists on his label, as well as seeing some of them die prematurely. However, Sean Combs has not only survived, but he has found a way to thrive and become a billionaire in the process. At this point, it is a wait-and-see situation. Only time will tell. In the meantime, Combs needs to begin to work on the source of the pain and childhood abuse that allowed the monster deep inside him to grow and hurt other people. Hurt people, hurt other people. The future is ultimately the final judge, so don't count him out-- at least not just yet.

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Age Mentality Adjustment Minus 4 and Career Technical Education

September 7, 2023|Education

By Keith Cook, CPA

Mr. Cook is a successful businessman and philanthropist and a Howard University School of Business graduate.



I grew up in a neighborhood with 95% two-parent households; even the single parents were stable households. We were very mature young people. Most of us started working paper routes at twelve, even though Marijuana use was prevalent from twelve up. Many were athletes. Shit, the high school parties were over at 1 AM for ages 14

through 17. Parents let us use their cars, and almost everyone had a girlfriend or a boyfriend. I walked to school by myself, crossing major streets starting at seven. My parents were about 35 when I was eight. If they went out to a party, I would be home alone. Almost all of my male peers, starting at 15, had unattended female company in their rooms. My parents never saw my university campus, which was located in another state, until my graduation.

Today, I'm in a world where I can interact with many young men between 17 and 27. To relate to them, I've learned to apply a formula I call the "age mentality adjustment." Not all, but for the majority, I subtract four years from their chronological age. In this way, I'm able to relate to the mentality. And not the words.

For instance, if I'm speaking, in most cases, with a young man who is 21, I have discovered that I need to adjust to the mentality of a 17-year-old. Does this formula also apply to the majority of young women today? I don't know. I just know it applies to the majority of the young men I interact with between the ages of 17 through 27.



In contrast, at 24, I and “ALL” of my circle had mortgages, kids, a woman in the home, some working, many on maternity leave, cars, car notes, and car insurance. Unfortunately, some young men today don’t want to work with their hands and get paid like men. All of this adds up to a strong argument for Career Technical Education in high school. The trades force a person to grow up. When your ass gets a home and a wife and baby, you grow up. These guys all want to be artists and millionaires, and the irony is most of the tradesmen I know have homes with stay-at-home wives with cars, children, and insurance and make a lot of money. All the artists I know live with their mama or WITH their girl—in her place!

Winning Against the Odds: Sha’Carri Shook Up the World!

August 23, 2023|Sports

By Dr. Michael J. Winfield, Sr.



Sha'Carri Richardson at the 2023 World Championships in Budapest | photo by ©kevmofoto.com

Sha’Carri Richardson won an improbable world title with a championship record time a couple of days ago. You could hear in the announcer’s voice the surprise that she pulled up and came from behind, winning in spectacular fashion and looking good in the process. Some people were surprised that Sha’Carri Richardson had actually won; the only one not surprised, perhaps, was Sha’Carri. The intense determination imprinted on her face revealed a singular goal as she ran her race—I got this! She had an

undeniable belief in her ability and who she was. A rare attribute in a culture of microwaveable personalities. All the more impressive when, perhaps for a lack of judgment, "Sha'Carri Richardson was denied a spot on the U.S. Olympics team after failing to pass a drug test and receiving a 30-day suspension not so long ago." (Roman 2023) As tough as a decision it was to take, Sha'Carri took full responsibility for her actions. By all accounts, she took her "L" the same way she took her victory lap—she walked it out. That said, what makes Sha'Carri a winner is that she never stopped believing in herself. And that is what impressed me.



I think that her whole life, and I can't wait to read the book, is an example of never stop believing in her power of herself. The ability to actualize and become what it is you know

you can become deep down inside is truly a gift not bestowed on many. In a 2021 interview, Sha'Carri shared the tragic news of losing her mother. However, despite the circumstances, she held on to her childhood dreams. She commented, "I am an Olympian. No matter what is said ... I am an Olympian. A dream I've had since I was young."



(NBC Universal 2021)

As the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling says, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you; If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you, But make allowance for their doubting too: If you can wait and not be tired by waiting, Or being lied about, don't deal in lies, Or being hated don't give way to hating, and yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise; If you can dream—and not make dreams your master, If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim. If you can meet with

Triumph and Disaster And treat those two impostors just the same..." (Kipling 1910)



"Well, "If" certainly sums up her life. So, as she takes a well-deserved victory lap, don't all jump on the bandwagon like you've all been down with Sha'Carri from the beginning. Let Sha'Carri take her well-deserved victory lap alone since she's the one who truly earned it. Let her savor the moment without some "Johnny come lately" shouting, "Sha'Carri, Sha'Carri, we love you, we love you!" Finally, Sha'Carri's win proves two things: America loves a winner, and nothing is impossible if you believe in yourself. Salute to the underdog.

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