

The Vergognosi of Staten Island

Joey Skee (January 19, 2009)



Again, Italian Americans are involved in racist attacks. Again, it's time to speak up.

It's happened again.

A morning news report on the radio announces a racist attack against blacks, this time on election night, on Staten Island.

Once again, I think, "Italians."

For in my city, all too many murders of people of color have been at the hands of young Italian-American men.

[Willie Turk](#) [2], 34 (1982) in Gravesend, Brooklyn.
[Michael Griffith](#) [3], 23, (1986) in Howard Beach, Queens.
[Yusuf Hawkins](#), [4] 16 (1989) in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn.
[Manuel Mayi](#) [5], 18 (1991) in Corona, Queens.

According to the New York Police Department's Hate Crimes Task Force and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, four men – Brian Carranza, 21, Michael Contreras, 18, Bryan Garaventa, 18, and Ralph Nicoletti, 18 – were involved in what The New York Times described as "[one of the city's worst series of hate crimes in years](#) [6]." The fact that a Latino (nicknamed "Dominican Mike") has also been implicated in these attacks doesn't lessen the shame and outrage I feel as an Italian American.

The suspects were charged in federal court of interfering with voting rights during their election night spree. Garaventa pleaded guilty, while the other three pleaded non-guilty. Carranza is out on bail after his mother posted a \$200,000 bond by putting up her house as security.

According to the federal indictment, the accused men were so incensed by Barack Obama's presidential victory that they went on a racist rampage across the borough. In the city's past, Italian-American youth waged pitched battles with their African-American and Puerto Rican counterparts as part of "turf battles" to defend neighborhood streets. This past November, these men allegedly drove out of their neighborhood in search of people of color to hurt. They are accused of:

- beating Alie Kamara, a seventeen-year-old Muslim immigrant from Liberia, across the head and legs with a metal pipe and a stolen police baton, while shouting "Obama" in Park Hill;
- pushing a black man to the ground in Port Richmond;
- accosting a Latino man, demanding to know who he voted for;
- driving past a hair salon and threatening to kill those inside, using a racial epithet, and cursing Obama; and,
- driving their car into another man dressed in a hooded sweatshirt who they believed was black. Ronald Forte, 38, father of five, was thrown against the window shield, shattering it. The white man was in a coma for forty-five days and now needs extensive physical therapy.

In recent days, Jewish individuals and groups have been discussing the "[shanda](#) [7]" (Yiddish for shame, disgrace) engendered by Bernard Madoff's \$50 billion Ponzi scheme and [organizing public forums](#) [8]. We Italian Americans share the vergogna (shame) and disgrazie (disgrace) of this heinous racist crime on Staten Island.

I'm fully aware that racism is not the purview of any one group; it is the tragic American legacy. But the fact that three of the accused are Italian Americans demands that we speak up. This is not the time for political distancing with flaccid assertions that these accused men are "aberrations that don't represent the community," blah, blah. Larry Ambrosino, head of a Staten Island booster group, spoke plainly, "Unfortunately, knuckleheads come in all sizes, shapes and colors. As a Staten Islander, as an American, as an Italian-American, it disgusts me." But we Italian Americans need to be more proactive and better organized in condemning such criminal acts. Where are the self-proclaimed leaders and spurious scholars who decry ad nauseam the likes of "The Sopranos?"

Jerry Krase has written thoughtfully about this subject on his [i-italy](#) blog:

"I believe that a major reason for the focus upon Italian Americans as epitomizing racial bigotry among white Americans is the reluctance of most Italian-American organizations and their leaders to honestly address the problem of racial and ethnic bias. In most cases Italian-American spokespersons have tended to deny the extent or degree of the problem or to make defensive statements when bias incidents in the community occur. This has resulted in an even greater focus on the community because it projects an appearance of lack of remorse or sympathy for victims of bias-related violence."

In 2005, after an Italian American was arrested in Howard Beach for a hate crime, filmmaker/writer Kym Ragusa, historian Jennifer Guglielmo, and I organized an event entitled "Creative Responses to Race, Violence and Community: A Call for Peace" at New York University's Casa Italiana Zerilli-Marimò. The evening of readings and performances by scholars and artists musicians, and the subsequent audience dialogue, sought to find creative and collaborative ways to combat racism.

Yes, Italian Americans can be [the new anti-racist front](#) [9], on this day we honor Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision and courage, and as we ride the sweeping tide of history that is the Obama presidency.

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