Dear Higher Education
LETTERS FROM THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOUNTAIN

Finding Things in Common

JERRY KRASE

Dear Higher Education,

Although I am an Emeritus Professor, I regularly teach, now as an adjunct, the Sociology of Race and Ethnicity at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. When I started there in 1969, about 80% of my students were working- and middle-class Jewish, Irish, and Italian Americans. Over the decades the student body gradually changed, and last semester my students were primarily African American, Afro-Caribbean, South and East Asian, LatinX, and Middle Eastern, with a few students categorized as what people unfortunately refer to as "White" as if there is nothing more meaningful about "them." As a person of maternal Sicilian heritage, a group that aspired to whiteness both in Europe and especially later in the United States, I take, along with my students, a collaborative deep dive into the history and science of race and ethnicity, rather than using the usual "us vs. them" style.

We start with the "Out of Africa" theory, and my students learn that all people share 99.9% of our DNA. (To bring a little humor to the conversation, I note that we also share almost 99% with chimps.) This leads to discussions of how we came to appear so different and why skin color is such a major focus in the worlds in which we live. My students still refer to nonexistent Black, Red, White, and Yellow distinct "races," and, except for my bio majors, have little understanding of the genetic relationship between skin color variation and vitamin D, or of other differences in physical appearance among humans. More importantly, we consider who decided which visible physical characteristics were "superior" to others, and how these social constructions resulted in chattel slavery in the USA.

Making myself a subject is another way of reducing differences. As someone who shared light skin, blue eyes, and blond hair with my mother, I explain that my Aryan looks came from the Normans, who found my Sicilian ancestors irresistible. While my students have a basic understanding of the Holocaust, in which racist rage was focused on Jews, I discuss how the Nazi master racists also regarded Blacks, mixed race people, Romani, and Slavs as subhuman, and saw Mediterranean ethnics as inferiors. These biases had also found their way to America long before the 20th century.

To be an effective teacher, your students must trust you. American history, however, is filled with ethnic barriers to trust. As the ethnic composition of my classes changed over time, and as related divisions in society increased, I found other commonalities.

Over my more than half a century of teaching, three events stand out as especially ethnically and racially problematic for my subversive pedagogy: the too-close-to-home 1989 murder of Yusuf Hawkins, an African American, in an Italian American enclave in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn (Krase, 1994); the 1992 Christopher Columbus Quincentenary national celebration/commiseration (Krase, 1997); and the Black Lives Matter Movement, a thankfully loud and visible response to four centuries of Black lives not mattering enough (Krase, 2020). In the first two instances, the ethnicity I shared with the perpetrators was highlighted in the popular media. In the case

of the Columbus Quincentenary, Italian American organizations trumpeted their alleged connection to Columbus and were outraged when the glorious Discovery was changed to a tragic Encounter.

When Yusuf Hawkins was murdered, the mass media took the opportunity to deflect attention from the racism of the nation to that of a particular hyphenated ethnic group. This was especially troubling for me, as at the time I was Director of the Center for Italian Americans Studies at Brooklyn College and was called upon by journalists to explain Italian American racism. Sadly, the subsequent murders of Dante Whyte, Andre Hill, Manuel Ellis, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, and George Floyd, to name just a few, erased the easy way out of ignoring *the* National Problem. I had long been deeply involved as a scholar-activist in anti-racist and other human rights activities in Brooklyn and beyond. As an educator, however, tragic events like these provided a challenging opportunity for me to develop curricula about the dis- and misinformation that fuels both bigotry and misplaced ethnic pride. In this regard, I discovered historical commonalities (not equivalents) between Indigenous Americans, African Americans, and Italian Americans that have informed my teaching and reduced the gulfs between myself and my Students of More Color than I.

As to Columbus and the colonization of the "New World," I have taught my students about the contemporaneous colonial feudalization of Southern Italy, especially that of Sicily. The oppression did not end with unification and inexorably led to the exportation of migrant labor and the eventual exodus to the Americas of people, including my grandparents, who had become the "N------ of Europe." When I taught a seminar on Italians in America and shared the history of Sicily, one of my Haitian students remarked on its sad similarity with his home country. In a related vein, although Cristoforo Colombo was an American icon, while the US was preparing to celebrate the Columbian Exposition in 1892, there was a mass lynching of Sicilian migrants in New Orleans. Theodore Roosevelt considered the lynching "rather a good thing." and *The New York Times* agreed that "Lynch law was the only course open to the people of New-Orleans" (*New York Times*, 1891)

There is so much more I could share as to unfortunate parallels, but Booker T. Washington's *The Man Farthest Down; The Struggle of European Toilers* is the most instructive:

> I have described at some length the condition of the farm labourers in Italy because it seems to me that it is important that those who are inclined to be discouraged about the Negro in the South should know that his case is by no means as hopeless as that of some others. The Negro is not the man farthest down. (Washington, 1912, p. 144)

Here I must note that I recently learned why my Sicilian great-grandparents fled to the US in the late 19th century, decades before mass migration from Italy: a massacre of protesting workers occurred in their hill town of Marineo in 1893. The *New York Times* provided a different script for its readers: "Thirty of the rioters killed and fifty wounded" (New York Times, 1894).

As historians of Italian America sometimes note, the privileging status of Whiteness, especially in southern states, for those of Southern Italian descent was problematic, and these people often shared neighborhoods with African Americans. It must be admitted, however, that Italians lusted for the blessed bleached status at home and abroad. And as Rudolph Vecoli (1995) and Fred Gardaphé (2002) informed those willing to know, the begrudging acceptance of Italians who lusted for the status and privileges of being White in America took place in the 20th century. This is another important lesson for my students of all backgrounds, as it points out the social construction not only of the non-existent races but of the damning ideology of racism itself. Every day, it seems, there are new insults to our common humanity, but I am happy to share both my methods and materials to my fellow in the hope that it will lighten our burden.

Sincerely,
Jerry Krase

PS: While I was writing this letter, I came across a story in *The Guardian* about recently elected Roman Catholic Pope Leo XIV, who is Sicilian on his father's side. The pontiff's maternal grandparents, the Martinezes, at one point identified as Black. But by 1920, when racial oppression was rampant as well as often violent throughout the US south (and not yet deemed unconstitutional by the country's federal supreme court), the Martinezes had moved north to Chicago. And, following the lead of other similarly situated families in the US, they switched their racial identity to white.

PPS: Recently, I was almost instructed by our university (CUNY) and college (Brooklyn) administrators to avoid what I must describe as "politically" sensitive issues that might make some students feel uncomfortable. In response, I asked if that meant that I can't talk about bigotry because the bigots in my class will feel uncomfortable. As you see by my letter, teaching about race and ethnicity requires discomfort.

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