Contemporary youth subcultures are distinguished by styles that express a collective identity. The 1970s disco trend galvanized an Italian-American youth subculture in New York City known as “Guido.” Previous research investigated the symbolic representation of ethnicity in youth styles and ethnic labeling in the public discourse (Tricarico, 1991, 2001, 2007, 2008). The appearance of an Internet chat scene known by the pseudonym ItalChat opened a window on the way youth articulate ethnic identity on “the level of rhetoric and in conversation” (Maira 2002, 191). The construction of ethnic boundaries was an ongoing project that constituted ItalChat as a cultural space.

The relationship of ethnicity and youth culture has largely been overlooked in American sociology. Cornell and Hartmann (2007, 211–36) disregard age as a source of “internal differentiation” within ethnic groups and the possibility of youth culture as a “construction site” for ethnic identity. The social anthropologist Jenkins (2008, 68) is alert to the importance of ethnicity for “life-course transitions, particularly before the assumption of social adulthood,” but discussion is limited to schooling and the labor market. However, the intersection of ethnicity and youth popular culture is being mapped in the field of youth studies. A theoretical approach focuses on “youth agency,” or the “meaning-making, narratives, cultural productions, and social engagements” of young people as they “engage popular culture” (Maira and Soep 2004, 246). Contemporary youth cultures are “discursive” formations with invented identities and blended or hybrid styles (Austin and Willard 1998, 4). While the Birmingham School interpreted youth style as a response to class relationships after World War II, subsequent investigations have spotlighted ethnicity (Bennett 2001). Research in the United States has focused on racial minorities, notably George Lipsitz’s studies of Mexican-American Pachucos in the Southwestern United States, which has produced hybrid cultural symbols such as the zoot suit and the “low-rider” automobile. Hip-hop has become the most intriguing ethnic youth subculture in the literature (Rose 1994; Dimitriadis 2001). Sunaina Maira (2002) has called attention to immigrant and second–generation cultures with a study of South Asian “Desi” “party” subculture in New York City that mixes elements of an ethnic heritage and popular culture.
Guido expands the discussion to a European immigrant ethnicity that remains racially ambiguous. Like black and Latino ethnicity, it is still referenced to inner-city slum neighborhoods. Guido has roots in ethnic neighborhood culture in New York City that shapes a route to American popular culture and a relationship to black youth culture. A “concern with the local” (Bucholtz 2002; also Back 1996) counterbalances the focus on diaspora ethnicity found in globalization perspectives (Maira 2002; Sansone 1995).

Guido presents an opportunity to study youth popular culture as a construction site for Italian-American ethnicity. An approach that emphasizes the social construction of ethnicity allows for ethnic social and cultural forms that are adaptive and fluid. In contrast to the assimilation paradigm, it restores meaningful ethnic agency to Italian Americans beyond the immigrant generation. Italian-American youth culture is interpreted as an artifact of local circumstances, in particular demographic and structural circumstances. A broader emphasis on expressive culture is a counterpoint to a deviance perspective both in the scholarly literature and the mass media.²

The Study

Internet chat rooms warrant a “virtual ethnography” casting the researcher as a participant-observer of synchronous interaction (Mann and Stewart 2000, 195–215; Hine 2000). This method facilitates “a better understanding of participants’ ranges of identity performances and the meaning those performances have for them” (Kendall 1999, 71). A chat room is a “site where language takes place” (Mann and Stewart 2000, 195). Language is “the most fundamental means of symbolic work” (Willis 1990, 99), and in chat rooms it typically assumes the form of a conversation—“a fluid, interactive process in which all participants take turns to contribute, shaping the direction and structure of the text jointly as they go along” (Schirato and Yell 2000, 108–9). Meaning in ItalChat was literally created in the “writing” of youth, using keyboards and video monitors. Chat has evolved a vernacular of “written conversations” (Rheingold 1993) that is a hybrid of speech and writing. As such ItalChat was studied in a manner comparable to the “writing cultures” of urban graffiti taggers (Austin 1998) and “the notetaking/passing” of “young girls at school” (Prettyman 1998). Access to this new technoculture gave Italian-American youth the opportunity to become “producers” as well as “consumers” of “common culture” (Willis 1990).

Chat communication can also be apprehended as an “artifact” (Mann and Stewart 2000). It is text that can be printed as hard copy and warrants
content analysis. This especially applies to personal home pages or website pages linked to screen names and accessed from inside the room or in a sort of anteroom where a list of screen names inside the room was available. Home pages were more conducive to stylized presentations of identity because they were asynchronous. As the research progressed, they incorporated digital photography, which added the dimension of meaningful “looks” that became increasingly necessary for “hooking up.”

The Internet was initially conceptualized as a “virtual world” separated from the “physical world” and social divisions such as race, class, and gender (Hine 2000, 144; Mann and Stewart 2000, 215). However, this view has been supplanted by the realization that online and offline experiences are “continuous” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, 450–3; Kendall 1999). ItalChat was embedded in the field of local Italian-American youth culture. Symbols and meanings could be interpreted from a position in “familiar real world cultures” that tempered “the insubstantiality of the virtual venue” (Mann and Stewart 2000, 195–215). Hine (2000, 221) maintains that this is methodologically significant because “the use of different ways of observing and communicating with participants provides a kind of triangulation through which observations can be cross-checked.”

There are complex legal and ethical issues concerning the privacy of Internet communications (Hine 2000; Frankel and Siang 1999; Kraut et al. 2004). The chat rooms are publicly accessible, at least to the ISP subscribers, and produce “published information.” The ISP’s “terms of service” agreement did not preclude the kind of scholarly research conducted for the study. The further step was taken to safeguard the anonymity of individuals in chat space by not using literal quotes and by using pseudonyms wherever possible. A precedent for the latter is found in Jacobson (1999) in order to “disguise digital identities” while trying to preserve the “flavor of images evoked” by screen names. The identity of the ISP and the precise location of ItalChat are also concealed. Issues of privacy are not peculiar to Internet research but shared with offline ethnography (Kraut et al. 2004). Informed consent was not solicited to minimize distraction, an issue that is also present in offline ethnography. However, youth affiliated with the subculture were made aware of my research interests in offline conversations. I initially learned of “the chat room for Guidos” from them and was tendered invitations to join the chat room, which was available to me as a subscriber to the ISP. I first visited ItalChat in late 1999, although formal data collection took place from January 2000 to September 2001. Observation presupposed a low profile achieved by a screen name devoid of youth culture meaning. A strategy of “lurking” for
short durations sought to minimize requests to chat, which were respectfully declined.

Online chat was a nascent youth culture trend when data was collected. A chat scene positioned local Italian-American youth in a youth culture practice that has since evolved into extensive sites for social networking such as Facebook and YouTube. ItalChat occupied a tiny “niche” within the cyberspace universe of a major Internet company owned by a global conglomerate. Commercial ISPs mediate the vastness of the Internet for subscribers. They offer uniform content and the opportunity to participate in interactive formats, chat rooms, and message boards with ISP subscribers. While uniform content gives the Internet experience the properties of a mass medium, chat rooms and message boards function as interactive “niches” (Thornton 1995, 14). In contrast to message boards and even instant messaging, chat rooms mediate synchronous connections to a group of age peers. This media space transposes a culture of “youth formations” predicated on little or no “adult surveillance” into the home (see Austin and Willard 1998). Member-created chat rooms were established and named by individual subscribers under a “terms of service” agreement and were available to millions of subscribers who paid uniform monthly fees. Like other chat rooms sponsored by the ISP, ItalChat was created by “members” rather than by the ISP and assigned a monitor who regulated content. It was embedded in a roster of chat rooms created by members of the Internet service; a survey of this roster revealed a multiplicity of identities including an array of ethnicities, lifestyle interests, and a selection of youth subcultures such as “Goths” and “Thugz.” In contrast to message boards, chat rooms have to be created daily in real time.

The name “ItalChat” is a pseudonym for two chat rooms that were listed separately on the ISP roster of member-created chat rooms. However, the two rooms had a membership (recognizable by screen names) that moved seamlessly from one to the other and evidenced the same vernacular culture. Both were up and running every evening that I searched the ISP roster during the period of data collection. Accessibility was on a first-come, first-served basis and both rooms operated at full capacity at peak times. A maximum of twenty-three subscribers could be accommodated, although this was subsequently expanded to thirty. I discovered nine other rooms that appeared to be affiliated but their existence was short-lived. The number of rooms in operation seemed to be largely a function of demand rather than ideological or style differences. ItalChat rhythms reflected youth social schedules; weekday usage surged by late afternoon,
suggesting the end of the school day, and was “off the hook” late into the night. The age of ItalChat participants seemed to range from late teens to early twenties when offline leisure options expanded. While age is likely to be embellished online, it could often be checked against other identity presentations (e.g., as college students).

ItalChat can be described as a “life style scene” (Irwin 1977). The foundation of this scene was a “microculture” composed of “flows of meaning which are managed by people in small groups that meet on an everyday basis” (Wulff 1995, 64). While there are noteworthy differences with offline “microcultures” that feature face-to-face interaction, the concept calls attention to the way members “choose cultural concerns that relate to their specific situation and reformulate them on their own terms as far as possible” (64). ItalChat adapted the agenda of an offline youth subculture that revolved around identity display, social networking and sociability, and prospecting for dates and sexual partners.

ItalChat youth invested considerable energy in the stylized presentation of identity. This referenced familiar offline elements, although the Internet occasioned a different kind of spectacle. Stylized presentations routinely appropriated popular media texts, such as the lyrics of a favorite song: “The way I feel is sexual. It can’t be intellectual.” Home pages facilitated on-screen face work and self-advertisement anticipating the popular youth sites Facebook and MySpace. The computer screen provides a virtual wall for cyber writers. Virtual culture allowed for the creation of “expanded identities” (Turkle 1995) and “life-movies” that were more “imaginative” than “expressive” (Gabler 1998).

Born in Italian Skies
Sent Down to Brooklyn
To Put Sparkles in Your Eyes
Freestyle Goddess
Livin in this Bensonhurst Fairytale

Fantasy was not only acceptable but expected. However, this was a virtual embellishment of a local cultural script. A local cast of characters was transparent in virtual ItalChat narratives.

ItalChat was a place to “hang out” where the regulars knew your name. It anticipated the structured social networking sites Facebook and MySpace except that it grew out of local peer group networks. ItalChat was not the creation of isolated and “disembodied” individuals. It may have been founded by the members of a specific peer network as a way
to communicate online as a group in real time. Local cliques were transplanted whole. As with my example, many were likely directed to ItalChat by someone offline; two informants purchased a subscription to the ISP to engage offline friends in the new scene. On one occasion a request was issued for “someone” to “leave” the room so that a “friend” could enter. Youth routinely brought local cliques into the picture with “shout outs.” ItalChat participants were often personal acquaintances who knew your surname as well as your first name. An offline informant routinely connected with her offline social circle late at night when she “should be doing school work or going to sleep.” Peer group loyalties centered on the neighborhood (e.g., “Bensonhurst is the best”), which is the cornerstone of a vernacular ethnic culture. There were ubiquitous references to the neighborhoods that map the Italian-American presence in New York City: Morris Park, Throgs Neck in the Bronx; Bensonhurst, Gravesend, Marine Park, Bay Ridge, Dyker Heights in Brooklyn; Astoria, Ridgewood, Howard Beach, Middle Village, Whitestone in Queens. The wide geographic distribution makes it likely that many youth stumbled on the site as ISP members. While a personal referral was not necessary, personal strangers had to be cultural insiders.

Chat room presentations of self and “hanging out” were often a pretext for “hooking up” with the opposite sex: “Chasin the Italian Ladies. Lookin for a Guidette!” Although digital photographs were increasingly prerequisites for hooking up, the limited repertoire of visual cues meant that sexual interest was primarily conveyed through wordplay rather than meaningful looks. Heterosexual interest could be communicated with blunt directness: “Where’s my Guidettes at?” It was often matter of factly scrolled in chat text like the copy for personals’ advertisements: “m/19/Italian”; “18/f/Italian/Bensonhurst.” Relative anonymity may have promoted more blatantly sexualized presentations: “Any ladies in here wanna sex me up?”; “Saving Sperm for Cancun.” While females could follow a romantic tack, they also affected a sexual gaze: “Any nice Italian stallions in here to talk to?”; “I Love Pretty boy Italians”; “Where are the bracioles?” Anonymity may have promoted a challenge to a masculinist ideology that framed “Guidettes” as sexual property that could be “used and abused” (Tricarico 1991, 46). In ItalChat, females subverted the masculinist ideology of Guido when they represented as sexual predators and objectified males: “Where are my Guidos!” A “Full-time Guidette” appropriated the cruising rituals of male car culture for “Guido runs.”

The work of hooking up could move to a more private online space for “instant messaging” or to an older communications technology in the telephone and ultimately to an offline encounter. The cultivation of
online prospects served as the major interface with life offline, affording youth dissatisfied with a dwindling pool of eligible Italian Americans in the neighborhood a way to access the burgeoning metropolitan diaspora. Competition for eligible partners promoted self-aggrandizement and invidious distinction: “I’m better than you.” There was skirmishing among males posturing for female attention. A virtual altercation once erupted that threatened to move offline:

A: I’ll meet you anywhere you want.
B: You’re a punk.
A: Ha, Ha.

Competition for dating and sexual partners set the limits of “third-place” sociability.

Ethnicity and Youth Identity

Social identity is the answer to the question, “Who are we?” (Nagel 1998). Italian ethnicity was necessary for legitimate access to ItalChat. ItalChat presentations unequivocally signified that “we” were, above all, “Italian.” It was made clear in the room name on the ISP roster. It was overtly and repeatedly stated in a setting where language mattered and nonverbal cues were missing. It was routinely asserted in personal advertisements inserted into the chat room scroll: “male/Italian/19.” It was a necessary feature of identity presentation, and considerable energy was invested in transacting ethnicity on the computer screen. Failure to communicate the proper ethnic signals elicited questions: “Are you Italian?” and “Is everyone Italian in here?”

Although an Italian identity was necessary and presented as self-evident and natural, it was not sufficient as a credential. The collective claim to being Italian (“we”) was implicitly coded to signify a local youth subculture. Insiders could infer this from meaningful symbolism conveyed in screen names such as “BrooklynItalian” and “ItalianGQ.” Since ItalChat was designed to achieve a critical mass of subcultural youth, it was important to communicate the insider meaning of “Italian.” This was available in “Guido,” a common Italian male name that marks a local Italian-American youth subculture since the 1980s. Guido signaled a meaningful connection between popular culture, especially cool youth styles, and Italian ethnicity:

Its all about spikey haired Guidos, fly cars, cafes, Being Italian, How well you shake it, expensive clothes, looking Bello/Bella, XTC, and Da House musick.
The Guido name exercises a local monopoly on the appropriation of Italian ethnicity for a youth culture strategy; the name “Cugine” (“cousin”), which was popular in the 1980s, and another kinship term “Goombah” were not commonly used in ItalChat. Guido had wide currency in ItalChat and true “insiders” knew the code. It supplied a dominant theme, a building block, for screen name architecture (“BrooklynGuido”). “Guido” and the female derivative “Guidette” signaled insider credentials (“Where my Guidos at?”) and articulated a more exclusive subcultural boundary (“If you’re not a Guido get out”).

While Guido implied “being Italian,” it did not name a room. Several attempts to open a room in the name of Guido failed to attract a substantial and consistent following and were short-lived. This likely reflected dissatisfaction with an identity that was stigmatized in the public discourse and, more importantly, in local youth culture scenes for its street culture pose (Tricarico 2007). A lengthy thread on an Internet message board sponsored by Club NYC, an organization that represented the New York City dance club industry, framed Guidos as a “major problem”: “The club scene in NYC has gone down hill so fast. Why? In one word Guidos.” Guidos did mount a counterattack: “We need more Guidos to fill NYC Clubs”; “It’s all about the Guidos in ’98!” However, a youth identified as “Italian” expressed disenchantment with Guido as an ethnic symbol: “Italian does not equal Guido, grow up.” I did not witness an outright referendum on this issue in ItalChat and encountered only one repudiation of Guido: “IM AGINNY NOT A GUIDO SO DON’T TELL ME ‘HOW U DOIN’. THAT GOES OUT TO ALL OF THE GUIDOS THAT LISTEN TO WACKTU [a play on commercial FM radio station WKTU] AND FREESTYLE.” Moreover, this objection posted on a personal web page expresses minor insider differences of style (i.e., jargon and musical taste) and avoids harsh moral accusations. There was increasingly widespread use of historic ethnic insults, especially “guinea,” but without generating an overarching identity (see below). These historic epithets were compatible with Guido as one ItalChat youth made clear: “I’m just the ordinary Guinea and Guido I guess.” The lack of consensus about a youth identity symbol enhanced the value of ethnic solidarity.

Ethnicity as a Device of Style Linkage

Being Italian was situated in a youth style performed offline. Guido coalesced in a collective response to disco in the 1970s. Club culture was quintessentially Guido and had totemic status in ItalChat:
There is no better music than freestyle. House music is life. Without it there is No Life.

Dance music supplied a central identity motif: “ItalianFreestyleBella.” Dance song lyrics were quoted in chat text and sampled for home pages, recalling the lyrics hand-painted on “Guidomobiles” in the 1980s. One home page evoked the physical milieu of the dance club with a digital graphic of an iconic glittering silver disco ball rotating against a wall of luminescent color, recalling the miniature disco balls suspended from the rear-view mirrors of the “Guidomobiles.” Clubbing, the ritual of privileging local dance club venues as youth culture practice, was celebrated as the quintessential act of “subcultural production.” Clubbing credentials were submitted as subcultural capital:

Its clubs, clubs, and more clubs. We tear up the Dance Floor.

Loyalties were expressed for clubs currently patronized by subcultural Italians such as Sound Factory: “You Can’t Compare That Club To Anything.” On club nights there was excited anticipation:

Factory Off The Hook Tonite [scrolled] 6

Rendezvous were arranged: “It’s club night my Guidos. Anyone going to the Palladium tonite?” Individuals identified as “club promoters” extended invitations for their “guest list.” Clubbing was the reference point for a distinctive “Italian look.” The home page profile of a nineteen-year-old female adapted a MasterCard television advertisement that manipulated ethnic signifiers to dramatize conspicuous stylish expenditure:

*Price List*
Versace Top $379
Prada Thong $95
Moschino Pants $95
Dolce and Gabbana Bra $119
Gucci Purse $320
Cabrio GLX $27,000

The Look When I Step Out of My Car
*Priceless* 7
Male screen names reference to the men’s fashion magazine GQ, an arbiter of the Guido club look (e.g., “GQGuinea”).

Club culture hedonism was expressed in the nomenclature of “hottie.” ItalChat discourse reconciled a conspicuously sexual persona with ethnicity: “Where are my Italian Hotties!” The term especially identified a female sexual gaze in the heightened sensual environment of the dance club (“I’m at the clubs hanging out with all the hotties”). Appropriation by females flouted traditional patriarchal authority with “turn heads” and “break hearts.” The nomenclature also repudiated the derivative Guidette label and was extended to Italian males, weakening Guido as an identity symbol in the process. The Hottie symbol was invoked for one of the two long-running ItalChat rooms, suggesting the ascendance of club culture hedonism over masculinist Guido street values. “Hottie cool” was referenced through home page links to a local dance club industry website that sponsored contests for the “hottest” contestants, males as well as females, represented in digital photographs.

Poaching Hip-hop

Club culture styles were taken for granted or naturalized as subcultural practice. However, hip-hop was a new symbolic repertoire for Italian-American youth at the time of the study. Indeed, it was only beginning to cross-over to white youth. New York City’s Italian-American youth have had a formative relationship with urban black musical culture that began with jazz and became marked with a turn to doo-wop in the 1950s followed by soul and disco. It was not surprising that Guidos began appropriating hip-hop prior to the seismic crossover of white youth in the late 1990s. This entailed more than a style shift since local Italian-American youth identities have become increasingly opposed to “blackness” (Tricarico 2001). ItalChat furnished new resources to resolve this contradiction. Characteristically, ethnicity did the heavy lifting for the appropriation of hip-hop.

Interest in hip-hop focused on the stylized “gangsta” idiom. Gangsta is a rap genre that flaunts themes of “ganglife, or more generally, life in the ghetto from the perspective of the criminal (or liminal, transgressive) figure” and has even defined “a new genre” called “don rap” that ironically mines Mafia themes (Krims 2000, 70–83). Gangsta music and music videos have proliferated in the mainstream media, graphically depicting the “playa principles” embraced by “the pimp,” “the hustler,” and “the mack” (George 1998, 50). ItalChat youth evidenced intimate identification with black street culture images; thus, a self-proclaimed
Guido lived in *Crooklyn*, the title of an autobiographical Spike Lee film, and Bronx Guidos borrowed the hip-hop designation “Boogie Down Bronx.”

The words and narratives authored by another youth category expanded the expressive capabilities of Italian-American youth, including a new vocabulary of personality traits (“phat,” “fly”), new performance repertoires (“illin’” and “sweatin’”), and new gendered poses (“playas” and “pimps,” “hoes” and “bitches”). There seemed to be sheer enjoyment in using the words of gangstas. ItalChat gangstas used the expression “aight,” a southern folk corruption of “alright,” dropped final consonants (“pimpin’”), and substituted “a” for “er” (“playa”) and “z” for “s” (“boyz”), with the latter often exaggerated as a final consonant (“Boyzzz”). They adopted the use of the verb form “to be” that ItalChat chatters identified as “Ebonics”: “Be pimpin hoes nationwide.” Perhaps nothing indicates their embrace of urban black youth jargon more than the use of the word “nigga,” a symbolic reversal of a racist epithet intended to resignify an aggressive, genuine blackness: “Sup my nigga,” “I love my tru nigga,” “F__K You Niggaz who hate me.”

In a setting that privileged words, gangsta furnished a cool lexicon for a youth culture pose committed to hedonistic consumption: “I’m into chillin, cruising, pimpin, partying, drinkin, blazin.” It established an idiom for dramatizing values of consumption and masculine power that were at the center of the Guido performance:

Pimpin da Benz . . . Spendin da phat cash  
My pockets are always fully loaded like a gun.  
Pimpen the Bitchez

However, ItalChat youth were not content to mimic gangsta as “wiggers.” Instead, they naturalized appropriations with subcultural markers:

I’m a gangsta. 100% Italian.  
Full-time Guido. Pimpin da Hotties  
wack . . . phat . . . strunz  
Im a playa for life, a real Guido  
Im Italyz Finest. GOODFELLAS. Pimpin the Girls.  
Wassup to my peeps. Forza Italia  
Giocatore [“player”] Anthony

Italianizing gangsta was also evident in the substitution of the historic ethnic epithets wop, dago, and especially “guinea” for the central gangsta identity “nigga”: 
While the use of epithets like guinea suggest mimicking of gangsta, a “bad” ethnicity had been formulated by a Bronx street gang called “The Golden Guineas” in the 1960s. It was also articulated by a local DJ in the late 1980s for a song called “Guido Rap” that featured the verse “Hey Guinea, Guinea.”

Gangsta furnished a cool new idiom for articulating the place-referenced youth identities rooted in the ethnic neighborhood, a central motif in urban Italian-American culture:

- Representin Astoria to the fullest. Big ups to my Astoria crew.
- Shout to my guineas in Bensonhurst
- Bensonhurst in Da House

At the same time, Italian neighborhood culture was reformulated in terms of the “ghettocentric” core of gangsta hip-hop (Rivera 2003, 98): “What up my ghetto people?” Italian urban places were reframed by gangsta idioms and myth. One male referred to himself as “straight outta Brooklyn” in lieu of the rap group Public Enemy’s original reference to “Compton,” California. Bensonhurst became known as “da Hurst,” a play on the “da hood,” the primordial place “Where a guinea can be a guinea.” Italian neighborhoods were reborn in the language of gangsta:

- Bad Asstoria
- Throgz Neck
- Thugz Neck
- Howard Bitch
- Howard Biatch

Italian-American “ghettocentricity” crossed the city line to Nassau County (Long Island): “Floral Park, New York, Da Suburban Ghetto.” A “GangstaPrincess” from relatively affluent Whitestone staked a claim to “High Class ghetto chic.”

Gangsta restored aggressive masculinity to a youth culture pose compromised by disco styles shaped by gay men. Gangsta reinforced the hypermasculine bent of Guido, especially its street code and the sexism and misogyny of its gender strategy. However, females also assumed a gangsta pose reconciled with ethnicity:
Puttana Princess
Dis Bella Runs Da Hood
Puppa Bella Be Makin You Sweat
[“puttana” is a derogatory Italian word signifying “whore”; “puppa” is Sicilian for “little doll”]

Gangsta “Bedda” (Sicilian for Bella) paid tribute to the home country: “Dese Palermo streets raised me crazy like whoa.” Gangsta bellas challenged the derivative Guidette persona with a female sexual gaze:

I Pimp da Fellaz
Im the one that makes all the pigeonz drool and all you scrubs look like foolz
Watch your man cause guys be sweatin us like whoa
Tell me why these hoez don’t like me

The stylized jargon of gangsta critiqued the male hegemony inherent in Guido:

Y is it wen a guyz a playa hes considered a PrO
But wen a Girl take ha turn
SHeS considered a Ho

A brazen sexuality eschewed any pretense of being a good Italian daughter:

If your girl only knew
that you waz tryna get wif me
and if your girl could only see
How you be dissin her ta talk to me
Wha would she do
Stop Jocken

Elaborating Ethnic Difference

In urban youth scenes, identity performances tend to be on the surface. Ethnicity is symbolically represented in styles and signified by obvious markers like flags and decals. In a discursive setting, however, ethnic meanings were elaborated and ethnic discourse became a performance strategy. Ethnic constructs in ItalChat referenced a local ethnic culture but also mass media representations. Ethnic discourse revealed a demand for essential themes. Ethnic idioms were invariably mined for youth culture difference and distinction.

ItalChat youth demonstrated scant interest in the “materials from the past” that ethnic groups typically use to construct cultural bound-
aries (Nagel 1998, 58). The “little traditions” of *la famiglia* that Covello (1967) placed at the social and moral “center” of Italian life in New York City in the 1930s echoed only intermittently in ItalChat: “What meat does your mother put in the sauce?” The primordial value of *famiglia* was compromised by youth culture concerns like web page “shout outs” that acknowledged family members alongside “my peeps” (friends) and gangsta idioms such as “R.I.P. Nonna.” In a space organized for hooking up, there was only one guy looking for “Sweet Italian girls that still have some morals, can cook, knows respect.” The persona of the “Italian Princess,” which reworks an ethnic stereotype for Jewish Americans, was an arriviste distortion of traditional family morality. The Princess is “Daddy’s Little Girl,” an identity that challenges the primacy of the Guido boyfriend in the name of fathers who “spoil” their daughters with consumption (i.e., “shopping”). They are “too spoiled to work.” Ethnic meaning was also extracted from the name “Bella,” which is Italian for a “beautiful woman/girl” and is a term of endearment within the Italian family. While “hottie” can be construed as a *puttana*, like Guidette, Bella re-appropriates iconic family values. It was a further assault on the male power of Guido notably in slogans such as “Bellas B4 Fellas” and “Fellas Come and Go But Bellas Are Forever.” *Bella* inspired a derivative identity for males: “Chillin with Mah Bellas and Mah Fellas.” While “fella” could be read as ethnic street culture (i.e., the Mafia movie *Goodfellas*), gendered discourse produced the male derivative *Bello.*

In contrast to the central importance of the home country for Desi youth (Maira, 2002), local urban places authenticated ethnic identity in ItalChat: “Sal from Bensonhurst,” “BrooklynGinzo,” and “BronxBella.” Bensonhurst was anointed as quintessentially Italian:

Bensonhurst, the home of the Italians
Bensonhurst . . . where an Italian can be an Italian
Where the real Italians are at.

As the city’s most populous Italian-American community (roughly 100,000 in 1990 and 60,000 in 2000), Bensonhurst is to Guido what the south Bronx is to hip-hop. Its ethnic authenticity was validated in the 1980s song “Bensonhurst, 86th Street” by a “Guido rapper” that celebrated the vitality of a cruising scene in the vicinity of Italian cafes. The iconic status of Bensonhurst is enhanced as the city’s Italian-American “last stand,” the place where Al Sharpton was wounded in 1989 in a knife attack while leading a march through local streets to protest the death of an African-American teenager in a street fight (Tricarico 2001). Still, while Bensonhurst
was a place to “be Italian,” there were other places such as dance clubs and chat rooms where an Italian youth can be “cool.”

ItalChat representations exhibited the vernacular culture of these Italian-American urban spaces. This featured a jargon formed by the collision of Italian peasant dialects and lower class New York City “street” English. An ethnic neighborhood speech style used in ItalChat incorporated snippets of a lower class Italian-American vernacular comparable to “Spanglish” indicating that the way English is spoken becomes a basis for ethnic identity beyond the immigrant generation. ItalChat routinely included phrases such as “Che brutto!” and common scatological references such as “vafanculo,” “brasciole,” “strunzo,” and “puttana” that were frequently misspelled (“compare” as “goombah” or “goumba”) or mangled by chat room linguistic conventions (“Kbrutto”). The crux of a stylized speech pattern was English vernacular as spoken in inner city Italian-American neighborhoods. At the time of the study, this was signaled by the phrases “fuggedaboud(t)it” (“forget about it”) and “How you doin’?” The latter became a stock greeting in ItalChat, instantly establishing subcultural credentials. Vernacular Italian-American was spoken by the “organic” Guido personalities on local dance music station WKTU FM, “Brooklyn’s Own” Joe Causi and Goomba Johnny.

ItalChat opened a window on the importance of mainstream media culture for constructing ethnicity. While there were references to Italian-American celebrities such as Mike Piazza of the hometown New York Mets, the most important media frames were fictional Mafia narratives. Hollywood productions such as Goodfellas and The Godfather and the HBO TV series The Sopranos inspired online life-movies in ItalChat. In one session, five of twenty-three screen names included the words “capo,” “wiseguy,” “Mafia” (twice), and “Gotti.” Perhaps reflecting its absorption by the entertainment media, the Mafia was a source of fanciful poses:

Question: What’s your job?
Answer: I’m a hitman for the mob! LOL.

Mafia imagery was occasionally appropriated for the female pose. Thus, “MafiaBella” called her girlfriends “Mafiettes” and fashioned a gender-appropriate Mafia fantasy: “For as far back as I can remember, I wanted to marry a gangster.” Compound names linked Mafia imagery to youth culture values such as being “sexy” or the “club” life. Mafia media narratives illustrated a traditional ethnic morality in personal web pages:
I made them an offer they can’t refuse.
Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

_[The Godfather]_

Never rat on your friends and always keep your mouth shut.
For as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a gangster.

_[Goodfellas]_

Nostalgia for a family culture that is the primordial center of Italian-American identity was expressed in memorable lines from _The Godfather:_

A man who doesn’t spend time with his family is not a real man.
Never take sides against the family.

An authentic relationship to the Mafia was based on personal Mafia connections: “You wouldn’t talk so tough if you knew who my family is.” Alluding to powerful connections is a ritual performance that was the subject of an inside joke: “If you know who I know you’d fugged-about who you know”; the ritual performance includes the practice of not dropping names. While real connections could not be discounted because the Mafia historically enforced a street code in Italian-American neighborhoods, this blurred with mass media narratives; thus, a home page shrine manipulated images from _The Godfather_ portraying John Gotti as “a man of respect.” Youth culture and Mafia intertwined when Goomba Johnny was incarcerated for evading federal tax on income derived from a Manhattan supper club owned by John Gotti and Gambino family associates. ItalChat graffiti expressed the mandate to “Free John Gotti and Goomba Johnny.” The imprisonment of an organic media celebrity generated a subcultural crisis in ItalChat: “the station sux without him.” Goomba subsequently rapped about his new street credibility on WKTU in the recording “Feds Threw a Party,” which reiterated the complaint of discrimination by the FBI against Italian Americans (Tricarico 2007).

Ethnic discourse in ItalChat featured a “constructed primordialism” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 16–19): “Being Italian is not a nationality. It’s a gift.” This “gift” had divine origins, conferring the status of a chosen people with an ethnic soul:

“The best thing that God could have given me is being Italian.”
“Being Italian is a gift. And I’m blessed with it.”

Ethnicity was represented as an ascribed essence: “The initiation to be Italian is to be born one.” Ethnicity was visceral: “Italian is My Blood. Its
My Heart.” A visceral and absolute ethnicity was grandiose: “I love being Italian. I wake up smiling because I got pride. It’s everything I want.” Images of “blood” and “race” that portrayed ethnicity as much more than a lifestyle “option” were epitomized in an anthem of unknown origin that appeared in several profiles:

- Italian Pride is in My Mind.
- Italian Blood is My Kind.
- My Italian Pride I will not hide.
- My Italian race I will never disgrace.
- Italian Love is all around.
- My fellow Italians never let me down.
- Show your pride.

I did not witness a single challenge of an absolute and privileged Italian essence from inside the ethnic boundary.

Given the powerful claims made in the name of ethnicity, it is not surprising that individuals struggled to present impeccably Italian credentials. On one occasion, the perfunctory ritual of self-presentation turned into a competition for ethnic authenticity:

- “100% Italian”
- “100% here as well”
- “100% Italian (born in Italy)”
- “110% Italian”
- “I am the Italianest”

This effervescent ItalChat moment substituted emotional vitality as the basis of solidarity in contrast to shared style. An ethnic absolute enchanted what was otherwise a consumption-oriented youth subculture: “It’s not a big deal. Being Italian is a big deal. It’s all about being Italian.” Being Italian even transcended the hierarchy of “cool”: “Not only am I perfect, I’m Italian.” While style is superficial and can be poached, essentialized ethnicity is an “inalienable” source of “cool” (Milner 2004, 207). The value of ethnic capital led to a creative search for the ethnic essence. “Italian” possessed the purity that was diluted in the hybrid identity “Italian American.” A quintessential ethnicity was available in the historic insults of “wop” and “guinea.” According to Isaacs and Pye (1976, 75–7), appropriating labels of “inferior status and outsidersness” conveys “boldness and strength.” Insider discourse reversed ethnic stigma with a “banteringly, even affectionately, and sometimes, in a complicated semi-jocular or say-it-with-a-smile transference” (78): “What up my woparones!” Power was claimed in the name of outsider stigma: “That’s
Mr. Guinea to U.” An oppositional Italianness was couched in youth culture idioms:

Where my guineas at?
The Ginzo is here!!
I am the ginniest ginn in this room!

Historical epithets were linked to youth culture cool in hybrid screen names like “Sexy Guinea” and “GuinzoGQ.” The frequent misspelling of “guinea” may have followed the convention of phonetic spelling in chat rooms (other spellings were gini, ghini, giny, ginze). It also points to identification with hip-hop, including the agency to make symbolic alterations suggesting that meaning has been formidably altered, as in the inversion signified by “nigga” and “niggaz.” Historic epithets regenerated the sense of ethnic authenticity originally attached to Guido, which has since been diluted by style (Tricarico 2007).

**Repertoires of Struggle**

“Symbolic repertoires have little impact in identity construction unless those repertoires can be put to use” (Cornell and Hartmann 2007, 241). In ItalChat, privileged ethnic capital was mined for “status honor” (Milner 2004, 207–8). Invidious distinction was amplified by youth culture hyperbole:

- Italians Are the Best
- Italians Do It Best
- Italians Cant Be Stopped
- Italians Rule and the Rest Drool
- Italians Rock the Rest Jocks
- If its not made in Italy it sucks
- Everyone is equal but Italians are better.
- You are what you are but being Italian is better.

Ethnic honor was mobilized in a struggle for power. This was projected on a global stage:

- Italians
- Rule
- This
- Fawking
- World.

[scrolled]
The struggle assumed epic dimensions:

To be Italian is to be loved by some, hated by many, respected by all, harmed by none.
A true Ginny has many enemies.

It was nevertheless a local affair pinpointed to familiar cultural arenas: “<we alreDy DoMiNate NyCz CluBz, BaRz, CaFeZ aNd OrGaNiZed CRiMe>.” In the symbolic economy of gangsta hip-hop, others were doomed to inferiority, insignificance, and ethnic envy and, thus, deserving of being “dissed” (disrespected). Dominance referred to style performances and ethnicity was manipulated to stake a meaningful claim to cool styles; authentic ethnicity legitimated an authentic relationship to Italian designer brands like Gucci valued as mainstream fashion. However, style repertoires were embedded in street culture: “Don’t mess with the Italians because we kick your ass.” Gangsta style and Mafia morality were melded in this personal web page ode to “Da True Life of A Guido”:

Don’t ever Chill Wit Anyone But Fellow Guidz.
Respect Thoz Who Should Be Respected and F*CK Everyone Else.
Family Life in Any Guidoz Mind is Very Important So If Anyone Comz Close 2 Da Family Make Sure Its Taken Care of.
Never Talk About Da Family Wit Outside Sources.
Those Who R A Disgrace 2 Italians Should Be Shot Not Once But Twice . . .

A moral code rooted in a lower class street culture and a provincial ethnicity can explain why collective self-affirmation was bound up with an “exclusionary politics of identity” (Bloul 1999, 7):

What kind of Italians we got in the room?
To be Italian you must go through The Initiation . . .
Be Born One
No Fakes Allowed

A web page featured a graphic of an obscene hand signal intended for “Fake Italians” with an inscription, borrowed from hip-hop, “It’s an Italian thing.” While ethnic groups typically guard against the filching of ethnic capital, representing ethnicity as subcultural capital that is subject to commodification makes it vulnerable to “wannabes.” Essential ethnic boundaries locate ethnicity outside style, creating tensions with its own youth culture agenda, for example, by weighing phenotype over consumption style. The increasing demand for personal photos underscored the importance of “Italian looks,” although this obfuscated the relevance of ancestry. Nevertheless, the belief in absolute ancestry was emphatic: “If
you’re not 100% Italian you ain’t Italian.” Partial or hybrid identities were pronounced illegitimate. “PUERTOSICILIAN” was ignored. A female “Mexiwop” from California attracted the interest of only one person, a male who took the opportunity to come out of the ethnic closet: “I’m not sure what I would be . . . my father is Italian and my mother is Spanish.” However, the subcultural ideology employed a “one-drop” rule: “There are two kinds of people in the world, those that are Italian and those that just wannabe Italian.”

A privileged ethnicity was a claim to scarce youth culture resources such as space and “cool” style and, above all, members of the opposite sex:

I love being an Italian boy. I can wake up smiling everyday cause I know I got pride and I got anything I want in the world! IM me Italian girls.

An “ethnosexual boundary” (Nagel 2003) strictly limited sexual relationships to insiders:

If you ain’t Italian I’m sorry.
Don’t waste my time if your not Italian.

The nomenclature of Guido and Guidette, Bella and Fella located ethnic claims in a youth subculture:

Don’t IM me if youre not a GUIDO.
I am 20 years old and I live in [a Queens neighborhood]. I am 100% Guido.
I love Italian girls only (only ones I date).

Ethnicity was a source of sexual distinction when males appropriated the identity cliché “Italian stallion” popularized by the Rocky films: “Once you go Italian, you neva get off the Stallion.”

Border Work

Making meaning in ItalChat was predicated on drawing a boundary in relation to the intersection of ethnicity and style. This was especially intended for local youth subcultures with similar styles competing for scarce resources—a relationship that reflects ethnic, racial, and class positioning. ItalChat registered tensions with Latinos that focus on a shared commitment to electronic dance music. While Italian-American and Latino DJs were represented on WKTU FM, “The Beat of New York,” it was possible in ItalChat to have Latino music without Latinos:

A: Why are all the Spics In here?
B: Cuz they wanna be italian
A: Enrique is on KTU  
B: I love this song!!!!

Ethnic closure made it easier to naturalize the cultural property of others: “I love freestyle and I love to be Italian.”

Ethnicity was also invoked to set limits on appropriation of styles identified with significant others. While the groundswell of gangsta that energized ItalChat was opposed on the level of style, for example, as a preference for freestyle or house music, style differences were loaded with ethnic meaning:

V: What’s the Deal My Italian Niggas?  
R: Italian Niggas . . . That’s a Nice Mix  
R: ← WHITE BOY

When “ANTHONY DA GINNY” exclaimed “YO MY NIGGAS IM BACK,” it was met with a racist reprimand:

I feel real sorry for you Italians that like to speak moulians.  
For some reason in ItalChat, aight and niggas has entered into the Italian language.

While vernacular English expressions including chat jargon apparently did not compromise ethnic authenticity, hip-hop warranted a hard line:

IF YOU SPEAK OR ACT GHETTO DON’T IM ME.  
Stop talking like a nigger . . . maybe people would like you more  
I hate wannabe niggers.  
I ain’t sending my picture to anyone named WOP Cause “WOP” means  
WANNABE BLACK PERSON

Framing gangsta in the context of racial division brought awareness of a central contradiction:

B: If U Don’t Like Blacks Y Do U Talk like them, Listen to There Music and Dress Like Them?  
J: U Have A Good Point E  
B: I always ponder this.

This rumination ended abruptly, since no one in the room was able to conjure a definition of blacks as not “other.” I never witnessed a defense of this apparent contradiction—having it both ways—and ItalChat youth were not willing to concede that they were “acting black” if they were affecting hip-hop styles. While the contradiction had been articulated, the problem of being Italian in relation to blackness remained unresolved (see below).
Subcultural assumptions had to be defended against challenges launched from the outside. In one instance, someone presenting as “a little white boy” and “an American” living in “New Jersey just across from Staten Island” made disparaging ethnic comments about “Italians”: “Why all you Guinnys come to my country America anyway.” This was followed by a diatribe in which “greasy guineas” were portrayed as “not white.” The stream of invective was interrupted by an “Italian” who dismissed “little white boy” as “a redneck.” Another “Italian” chimed in that the “little white boy” would “probably soon be on The Jerry Springer Show.” Other detractors narrowly targeted youth culture claims: “Puerto Rican Girls Blow Italian Girls Away.” One sniper ridiculed Guido symbolism:

Any Mafia members in here?
Any Guidettes here?
Don’t touch the hair.
Anybody drive an IROC.

The most compelling subcultural challenges originated in the local urban culture. The concerted invasion of ItalChat by three Albanian youths linked ethnicity, consumption style, and street culture. The relationship between Italian Americans and more recent Albanian immigrants has been characterized by accommodation and intercultural exchange. The principal Albanian settlement in the city has been in the North Bronx, notably the Belmont section of the Bronx dominated by Italians informally identified as a “Little Italy.” While there was no mention of a specific offline encounter, local tensions may have been ignited by an online boundary. Just prior to the invasion, “Albanian Princess” entered one of the rooms. She apparently felt comfortable being in ItalChat and may even have been extended a personal invitation but was asked to vacate the premises because “this was an Italian place.” In any case, a surprise attack was mounted during a routine weekday evening chat. Three persons who identified themselves as Albanians stole into the room one at a time, a plan that presupposed “intelligence” about access protocols. They did not spring into action until the third person had entered. The intruders had screen names that signaled identities as male Albanians; online noms de plume became noms de guerre for a concerted “flaming” that released a scroll of invective against Italians. Except for the Albanian term “Hadje,” translated as “Come on,” the attack was carried out in American youth culture jargon. Their stated target was “Italians,” not specific individuals, and their assault was made as “Albanians.” Its main thrust was staccato assertions of “Albanian Power” combined with ethnic insults: “Italians suck.” Incessant scrolling of phrases such as “ALBANIAN CHAT” and “ALL ITALIANS GET OUT
OF THE ROOM” had a disorientating visual effect. A sense of usurpation was enhanced by the use of unconventional fonts and type in the colors of the Albanian flag. This intensive scrolling effectively overwhelmed an Italian response for a period of time, prompting the invaders to declare that ItalChat had been liberated. One of the invaders renamed the room “Italbanian Chat” until a second was emboldened to celebrate a complete takeover with the name “Albanian Chat.” The symbolic liberation of ItalChat was studded with patriotic pledges of support for the nationalistic struggle with the Serbians. At this juncture, the phrase “KLA ALL THE WAY” (Kosovo Liberation Army) was scrolled in bold red (the color of the Albanian flag) blocking other text. The concerted Albanian attack usurped ItalChat routines for over one hour.

Italians initially kept to routines like flirting but were staggered by the sudden explosion of dissonant chat that plunged ItalChat into crisis. They gradually mounted a counterattack that defended their (cyber)turf and fundamental subcultural ideology. The Italian majority returned fire by raining ethnic insults on Albanians. Disparagement singled out Kosovars, suggesting a familiarity with the recent Eastern European conflict; salt was rubbed in this ethnic wound with expressions of support for the Serbian military. However, the conflict quickly assumed a local dimension when Albanians were accused of “filching” the “good name” of Italians:

- Albanians are wannabe Italians
- Albanians are fake Italians
- They even got Italian flags on their cars and start to believe that they are

The Albanians turned this charge around, flaunting their own ethnic cultural capital: “Italians are wannabe Albanians.” Italians kept returning to the wannabe theme, apparently sensing that they hit a nerve: “You just want to be Italian and your not.” An intriguing exchange of ethnic insults drew on historical patterns of racial subordination in the United States and the racial anxiety of immigrant groups from Mediterranean Europe. As the Albanian barrage escalated, Italians were disparagingly referred to as “blacks,” and Sicilians were singled out as “Africans,” possibly reflecting a familiarity with regional prejudices in contemporary Italy where Northern Italians disparage Sicilians as “Africani.” When an Italian responded in kind, the charge flew back that “Albos don’t have niggas . . . but Sicily does.” Labeling each other “black” was significant since both groups have had hostile relationships with African-American youth and may be interpreted as a declaration of hostility between erstwhile allies. Ironically, invidious darkening of Italians was complicated by Albanian claims to gangsta authenticity:
I’m a real Albo nigga
Ya Niggas Can Jock My Style But It Takes A Real Albo Nigga To Rock The
Bitches Wild
ALBOS BE RUNNIN ITALCHAT
Albos sweat Italians

Italians did not challenge the Albanian claim to gangsta authenticity.

The upheaval ended with a hasty Albo retreat. I did not witness another altercation except for scattershot sniping by a lone Albanian the week following. A veteran of the invasion who billed himself as “an Albanian wrecker” maintained that it was the direct result of fighting between rival Bronx crews. There was a final, telling volley that reduced the conflict to matters of consumption style. In this tack, the clothes worn by Albanians were “uncool” alongside the designer brands “that we wear.” An Italian “female” chimed in, “I hate their cologne” (implying close physical proximity) and a “male” mocked their cars: “If UR Albo Its Nothin to be proud of . . . U buy ur cars at the Federal Auto auction.”

The Albanian affair was replete with self-aggrandizing claims to ethnic and style distinction that hinted at ethnosexual tensions. Subcultural challenges in ItalChat were often initiated by males pursuing “ethnosexual adventures” (Nagel 2003). The relative anonymity of cyberspace effectively removed the physical danger associated with sexual prospecting on urban turf. Monopolizing sexual access was integral to the masculinist control of turf found in lower class communities in New York City (Schneider 1999). It was at the root of a street confrontation in which a black teenager was killed in Bensonhurst in 1989 (Tricarico 2001).

Because their numbers have dwindled, Italian Americans have been less able to control their urban turf, a development that was being played out on cyber turf. The volatile interplay of sexuality and ethnicity was reenacted on numerous occasions on ItalChat turf. An amorous “Irish boy” from one of the outer boroughs “looking for an Italian woman to love me” became disgruntled when he attracted no interest and derided “Italian girls” as physically unattractive (e.g., “ugly body hair”). Several Italian males returned the insults, which escalated into trading claims about the fighting prowess of “Irish guys” and “Italian guys.” It is notable that “Irish boy” was tolerated until he challenged masculine power; racialized masculinity would have been stopped upon presentation. Indeed, preemptive and exclusionary warnings were issued to nonwhites (“no spics”). Comments denigrating African Americans were gratuitously inserted in stylized presentations.
Racial enmity fueled another episode that combined masculinist concerns of turf and sexuality. “Papi” jolted the usual routine of stylized display and hooking up with the introduction: “FINE BLACK MALE LOOKING FOR A FINE WHITE WOMAN.” In a linked web page “Papi’s” persona was elaborated as a “Black Latino” from “Brownsville,” embellished in gangsta imagery as a “Ghetto” in “Brooklyn.” When ordered to leave the room, “Papi” aired a “beef” (a hip-hop term) stemming from an altercation the previous evening: “Find out what happened Last Night in Glendale Queens.” This headline was scrolled until it filled the screen and was followed by the inside story that the night before “Italian boys” had “backed down” from a street fight when Papi and his group showed up in their Glendale neighborhood on the Brooklyn border.

Papi: All the Italians ran from my boys earlier in the day and that night
A: Yo Boyz Lets Go To Brownsville and Show Them Who Italians Really R
Papi: No White Boy Has Ever Come Here Looking For Trouble And Never Will
B: No one was running we were all there waiting for you
Papi: And at Cleveland [a local high school] all the Italians ran and left the Italian kid to get beat up
Papi: 70 Italian Guys Ran Away from Black and PR Guys
A: Hey Nigger
Papi: Find Out Before Your Times out Guineas

The posturing about masculine toughness veered back to the sexual when Papi turned his attention to the “sisters” of “Italian boys,” unleashing a cascade of racial invective:

Go Back to Africa
Morocano, Ziangaro [Italian for “gypsy”]
Get Out Moolie [corruption of “mulignano” for “eggplant”]
Italians Only

When Papi retreated, his account was corroborated by two individuals in the room who were privy to the local grapevine. With the masculine honor of Italians discredited, ItalChat youth attempted to restore the damage done to the subcultural ideology by switching to a status code based on style distinction: “They show up in vans . . . we rollin in the Benzos.” They staked a further claim to style distinction by invoking a lower class racial stereotype: “Papa in the Housing Project.” The claim to style superiority allowed them to arrive at symbolic closure: “Italians kick Moolies Ass.” The boundary was repaired and the space was reclaimed in the name of Italian ethnicity. When someone asked “Is anyone a true Italian
in here?,” implying that policing an ethnic boundary in cyberspace was a daunting affair, a “Dominican” female came forward. When one of the males who fought off Papi demanded her expulsion, an “Italian” female made a plea for racial tolerance, which won the day. Perhaps ItalChat had weared of border work, although it probably mattered that the interloper was a female.

Like the Albo invasion, the Papi incident was another cyber version of an urban turf battle with offline reverberations. Although no one asked how a street culture adversary discovered their online redoubt, Papi must have shaken any complacency that cyber turf would be easier to defend than urban turf.

Insider Challenge

A more profound boundary crisis was instigated by a “21 year old Italian female” named S., who lived in Bensonhurst and claimed fluency in the Italian language, which she occasionally exhibited. She ate pasta on Sunday in a traditional ethnic home. She had insider knowledge of the ethnic neighborhood. She dropped the names of subcultural youths and venues: “Did you see ______ last night at the Sound Factory?” Her impeccable subcultural credentials were corroborated by several others and she seamlessly fit into ItalChat routines. It was jarring, then, when S. announced a sexual interest in “Black men, 21-25” to the exclusion of “white boys.” Her sexual politics were scrolled over and over again in staccato bursts of bold lettering: “Don’t Ask for a pixx if UR a White Boy. Black Guys Only.” This included a terse reference to her personal web page for further elaboration: “White Boys Read Profile Stop Asking Why.” She became more defiant when reproached: “Ive been with black guys for 4 years.” She subsequently identified “Dominican” and “Puerto Rican” men within a field of sexual interest, which was now spanning further into the African diaspora.

An Italian-American female crossing the “sexual color line” (Nagel 2003, 117) flagrantly challenged a cornerstone of the subcultural ideology linking a monopoly on dating and sexual “property” with a system of masculine honor. Presenting as a “Blonde and Blue-eyed Italian” mocked a strategy of unambiguous whiteness as well as claims to a pure Italian ethnicity. Impugning the virility of Italian males in relation to nonwhite males and usurping their proprietary claim to Italian females attacked the masculine codes that underlie street culture. She denigrated the privileged sexuality of Italian males evidenced in the frequently used persona of the “Italian stallion.” S. lumped “Italian” men together in a racial taxonomy
with “other whites,” although she later portrayed whites as “less virile” than Italians, delineating a hierarchy of sexual performance in which Italians occupied a middleman or “in-between” racial status (Orsi 1985). While this measured sexual compliment may have thrown ItalChat males off guard, no one in the room staked a claim to black ancestry in what constituted a formative subcultural moment. Mocking male virility was reinforced by denying the claim to physical toughness that is the linchpin of defended Italian-American neighborhood order and was thus an attempt at total emasculation. Physical control over turf implies the ability to exclude rival males from the competition for females by physical force; a perceived threat to local Italian females from young black males sparked the 1989 Bensonhurst “racial killing.” S. astutely linked sexual power and physical power: “I like Black/Dominican/Puerto Rican men Rest of you white Boys are scared of them So that’s a turn on.” The responses of ItalChat youths were consistent with the moral order of Italian-American neighborhood culture:

S.: “Italian guys aren’t as tough as Black guys”
Room: “Black guyz R scared of Italians”
“aint No REAL Italian scared of a fawkin Moolie”
“U Nigga Lover”
“Im not afraid of Black guys S.
I have a Black guy in my family tree . . .
In fact he’s still hanging there”

S.: “Yo I live in Bensonhurst and all these Italian wites Be mad scared of a brother”
Room: “Come to Howard Beach w/your brothers and we will see what happens”
“They will be running for the highway like the last bunch”
“U were probably talking about the Jews”
“All The Gangs That The Spics and Blacks Got . . . The Italians Got 1 . . .
The MAFIA.”

The reference to Howard Beach was notable since this small middle-class enclave of Italian Americans was the site of an infamous episode of racial violence in 1986. It inspired Spike Lee’s films Do the Right Thing and Jungle Fever, the latter film involving an adulterous affair between a working-class Italian American from Bensonhurst and an African-American architect in the firm in which she worked as a secretary. The image of “Howard Beach” is also notable in light of another street altercation in that community in 2005 involving Italian-American and
African-American youths. Finally, it is noteworthy that “the Mafia” was invoked as the ultimate weapon in the Italian-American street code. When S. taunted that “the Mafia was all made up in movies,” she was invited to “Come to Howard Beach and we’ll show you there is no Mafia.” In fact, Mafia social and cultural capitals have been implicated in episodes of street violence in the city’s defended Italian-American neighborhoods.

An eruption was imminent whenever S. was in ItalChat. Even when she was conforming to expectations, her body of work, including her home page profile, was enough to provoke racial invective aimed at African Americans. When she/her persona was not present, she was personally attacked for the repudiation of core group values: “She gives Italians a bad name.” Perhaps most despicable was the embrace of the consummate “other,” suggesting the betrayal of the racial project to achieve “whiteness”; thus, S. was a “sellout,” a “wigger,” and “a moolie lover”—a vernacular term that underscores the ethnosexual boundary. At one point, it was explained that it would be in her self-interest to go elsewhere, since if she was really interested in nonwhite males there were none to be found in ItalChat. Although repeatedly disparaged and told to leave, she asserted a right to remain as an “Italian.”

S. sought to undermine the claims of Italian superiority as an absolute, specifically in relation to nonwhites, and especially in relation to masculinist values of sexual performance and physical toughness. She remained as a provocateur, once advising someone she met in ItalChat to “wear FUBU” for a rendezvous at a Manhattan club (FUBU is a hip-hop-inspired clothing company and the anagram stands for “For Us By Us”). She sabotaged a discussion underscoring the historical affinity of local Italians for black styles with a reminder of the enmity between the two groups, which boiled over when a black teenager was killed in a street fight with local Italian-American youths in Bensonhurst in 1989, and Al Sharpton led a highly publicized protest march through local streets:

S: An Italian stabbed Al Sharpten
C: I hate Al Sharpen

When the thread of cultural crossing was resumed several days later, S. insisted that adopting “lifestyles” did not “make you another color.” In an episode that revealed the complicated agendas of the protagonists, S. received the support of an “Italian female” curiously named Bianca who defended the right of “Black and Latino men to meet Italian girls” in ItalChat. This was folded into an ideology that posited “being white” as the ultimate threat to “being Italian”:
If you’re Italians and you consider yourself white you have no heritage. You probably eat Prego [a commercial tomato sauce] and say F*CK Im Italian.”

However, S. quickly turned against this position by asserting that “Italians are white” and that borrowing a “lifestyle” did not impart “another color.” This placated the room until S. complained that “there are too many Italians in this country” with their “guinea” ways.

S. was an anomaly that precipitated close scrutiny of her home page profile: “I never saw a blonde haired Italian.” Several hypotheses were floated as to her “true identity.” One scenario framed S. as “a guy” who was Italian and from Bensonhurst who fomented controversy to cloak a homosexual identity. Another cast S. as “a Black Italian” embittered by racial stigma. There was support for a scenario in which S. was a black male who was “race baiting”; this included a hypothesis that S. was really “Papi,” which S. playfully deflected: “No I Be White.” The acceptance of an authentic ethnic identity led to a call for insider justice: “We need 2 beat some pride into her.” A warning was issued that crossing the ethnosexual boundary was “not going to happen.”

After more than a month of turmoil, the “subject of Blacks” was pronounced “Boring!!” S. abruptly and unexplainably dropped an adversarial persona and resumed the role of sociable insider.

Conclusion: A New Italian-American Identity

Popular culture has become an important site for the construction of youth identities in contemporary societies. ItalChat depended on the ongoing construction of ethnicity for the symbolic boundaries supporting new cyberrituals in uncharted pop culture territory. In contrast to an urban style spectacle that privileges visual vernaculars, identity in ItalChat was communicated via “rhetorical strategies” (Thornton 1995). Opportunities for identity experimentation promoted cultural “crossing” and bricolage (Lipsitz 1994, 119). At the same time, a local urban culture constrained virtual processes of becoming.

ItalChat became a relatively “safe space” to “work within and across traditional fault lines” of ethnic identity (Fine, Weis, and Powell 1997, 253). Ethnicity was appropriated from traditional sources in the family and new ethnic forms such as the urban ethnic neighborhood. Appropriation of popular culture in the name of a de-contextualized and re-worked ethnicity demonstrates the ability of youths to create their own readings in the absence of effective adult surveillance. Discursive resources occasioned
the elaboration of ethnicity for a subcultural ideology that reconciles Italian ethnicity with “the new symbolic economy of fashion, entertainment, and media” (Zukin 2004, 173) and “the promise of consumer desire” (Lipsitz 1994, 5–7). Although more open to new cultural meanings, ethnicity is invoked by youth to “constrain what they could become” (McCrae 2003, 57). This reflects the contradiction of ethnic youth subcultures “at one and the same time calling attention to ethnic differences and demonstrating how they might be transcended” (Lipsitz 1994, 135). Ethnic boundaries make it possible to poach and assimilate symbols without surrendering difference. Thus, Italian-American “bricoleurs” meld Italian and English, (black) gangsta and (Mafia) gangster jargon, “wife-beater shirts” and baggy pants, and rap and freestyle music genres. ItalChat suggests that youth turn to ethnicity to delimit a “safe space’ to navigate the “postmodern adventure” (Best and Kellner 2003, 10). As with the appropriation of popular culture such as electronic dance music, invoking ethnicity for Internet chat expresses difference from others who inhabit the scene. Clear ethnic boundaries are an attempt to temper, if not avoid, the “fluidity” of symbols and membership characteristic of “postmodern culture” (Mafessoli 1996).

The construction of collective identity in ItalChat was bound up with power and social hierarchy including the struggle for status. A discursive setting enhanced the opportunity to exploit ethnicity for subcultural capital. Both youth subcultures and ethnic groups are “status groups” that construct identities based on “authentic” and “inalienable” value (Milner 2004, 77). ItalChat afforded a space where ethnicity was cultivated to “extract a premium price” (Arvidsson 2005, 247) in youth style markets. Market value had implications in the competition for scarce youth culture resources such as space and dating partners. ItalChat suggests that status claims are intensely negotiated with local others in a “dialectical interplay of similarity and difference” (Jenkins 2008, 12–14). Local divisions and rivalries refract the appropriation of style, including global flows such as club culture and hip-hop. Cybersparring with Albanians was an extension of tensions in the city’s immigrant queue and reflects turf competition among youths with similar nationality cultures. Blackness amplified turf threats and racial insecurities. The binary moral status of black youths is contradicted by a pronounced affinity for black youth styles. While gangsta is the single most important element in the current Guido remix, symbolic work creates meaningful difference so that hip-hop is not only consumed without black youths but mobilizes an Italian identity to oppose blackness.10 Although not directly evidenced in ItalChat, a turn to ethnicity has been a response to the symbolic boundaries that constrain the participation of lower class “bridge-and-tunnel” youths from the outer boroughs
in hip Manhattan clubs. Like Pachuco and hip-hop, Guido is a collective challenge to “a history of disenfranchisement from consumer society” (Zukin 2004, 157) in the name of ethnicity. A prestigious consumption style is fundamental to “the struggle for recognition and respect” of ethnic minorities in America (Lipsitz 1994, 121).

An online site was characterized by the “fluidity, occasional gatherings, and dispersal” associated with “urban neo-tribes” (Mafessoli 1996, 76). Interactive opportunities were available to youths throughout the metropolitan diaspora. To this extent, it can be compared to the dance club as a cultural space that promoted the gathering of youth from different neighborhoods. Similarly, ethnicity supplied solidarity for a new configuration of Italian-American youth subculture that transcended local and other insider differences. While Guido is blurred by the erosion of inner city turf boundaries and creeping hip-hop, an Italian-American youth category has become discernible in new suburban destinations where ethnic labels are imposed by others. The Internet furnishes a safe space to align youth culture rituals with new circumstances outside the shrinking ethnic neighborhood.11

Notes
1. Youth culture studies coalesced with the ethnographic research of the Birmingham School of cultural studies in the 1960s. Cultural studies privileges the role of human “agency” in the interactive processes of “meaning-making” within “structures inherited from the past and lived in the present” (Storey 1999, 159). Identity, as well as culture and social forms, are “not something fixed and coherent, but something constructed and always in the process of becoming” and often “incomplete” and “contradictory” (135). Individuals and groups are able to “create their own readings” in a process of “cultural consumption” (Schirato and Yell 2000).
2. Italian-American male peer groups hold a conspicuous place in ethnographies of urban slums (Whyte 1993; Suttles 1968). A recent study by Pinderhughes (1997) of racist violence among young Italian-American males in New York City ignored local ethnic culture and in particular the lively youth culture currents identified with Guido.
3. All collected data is either from chat records or personal web pages provided by the ISP. Original spelling and punctuation have been retained.
4. A “brasciole” is rolled, stuffed meat filet that Italian mothers and grandmothers cook in pasta sauce or “gravy.” It is a phallic symbol in the vernacular culture.
5. Ethnic identity as a problematic credential was reflected in the consternation of “L’Italiano”: “Io sono Italiano. Perche nessuno parla Italiano qui?” (“I am Italian. Why is no one speaking Italian here?”). “L’ Italiano” implicitly denied authentic ethnicity and dismissed ItalChat youths as “idioti, cafoni, stronzi” (“idiots, boors, turds”).
6. “Scrolling” refers to text that interrupts chat dialogue by filling the screen vertically. The intent is to usurp dialogue and take command of the screen.
7. Inclusion of the Volkswagen Cabrio suggests creative license in the work of assembling an authentic ethnic style.
8. Hyper-masculine Guido is out of sync with a local club culture that is shaped by a gay subculture and privileges feminine expression (Fikentscher 2000).

9. Appropriation of the Mafia in the name of ethnic authenticity is a response to gangsta hip-hop, which is seen as having “ripped off Italians” in the words of an offline Guido. This provides another way of naturalizing gangsta, which is more appealing as a source of youth culture cool.

10. Nagel (2003, 255) points out that “there is no more potent force than sexuality to stir the passions and fan the flames of racial tension . . . sex-baiting is a mechanism of race-baiting when it taps into and amplifies racial fears and stereotypes, and when sexual dangerousness is employed as a strategy to create racial panic.” Tensions were fueled by racial ambiguity. The frequently linked Club NYC website contained a thread going back to 1998 debating whether southern Italians, especially Sicilians, were “black” or “African”:

> All Italians from Sicily are part Black.
> Since the island was invaded and there women were raped by Africans that’s why they are so dark. Get it??

Racial ambiguity was also the subject of a lengthy and heated thread on the ISP Message Board for “Italian Americans” just a few clicks away from ItalChat. It was actually embraced in ItalChat on one occasion when a male declared that the size of the male sexual organ was a function of ethnicity and credited “Sicilians” with having “the longest penises” because “Sicilian is like half black.” This assertion was not challenged and actually flushed out a male who was “1/2 Sicilian/1/2 Black Right Here From Coney Island, Brooklyn.” A correction was offered that made this more nuanced: “Sicilians aren’t half Black there half African.”

11. One adaptation outside the ethnic neighborhood is New Jersey Guido, founded in 2002 by a self-identified Guido who created “the number one nightlife website in all of New Jersey and New York.” In contrast to ItalChat, ethnicity is downplayed as subcultural capital for “youth, beauty, and flash”—a style of “hedonistic consumption” centered on the New Jersey “shore.” See www.njguido.com accessed July 12, 2008. MTV’s Jersey Shore has promoted the identification of Guido with the Jersey shore. An ethnic boundary is strengthened by outsider disparagement and entire websites are dedicated to disparaging Guido. See “Guidos Suck” at www.who-sucks.com (accessed July 12, 2008). One characterizes “the vast surge in the Long Island Guido population” as a “plague” on a local “way of life” and only thinly veils an ethnic animus toward newly arriving Italian Americans from the city. See www.getoffourisland.com (accessed February 2, 2008).

Works Cited


