

Italian Canadiana

Blindsided by the American Dream

Maria Lisella

Volume 34, 2020

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087301ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37454>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0827-6129 (print)

2564-2340 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Lisella, M. (2020). Blindsided by the American Dream. *Italian Canadiana*, 34, 89–93. <https://doi.org/10.33137/ic.v34i0.37454>

Article abstract

In her essay “Shades, Color and Internal Dialogues in White America,” from which the present contribution is taken, Maria Lisella takes a savvy streetwise approach to balancing feminism with political consciousness. By sifting through the nuances and politics of her own body language in what appears to be a moment of imminent danger, she takes the long view by educating herself. She achieves this through listening to others’ individual experiences some of which depict white liberals trapped in a web of well-meaning gestures that can endanger them. From the human stories behind racism and prejudice in the Italian American community, she illustrates that dogmatic formulas do not address all situations; understanding among races can only be achieved through direct interaction with each other.

Blindsided by the American Dream¹

Maria Lisella

Abstract: In her essay “Shades, Color and Internal Dialogues in White America,” from which the present contribution is taken, Maria Lisella takes a savvy streetwise approach to balancing feminism with political consciousness. By sifting through the nuances and politics of her own body language in what appears to be a moment of imminent danger, she takes the long view by educating herself. She achieves this through listening to others’ individual experiences some of which depict white liberals trapped in a web of well-meaning gestures that can endanger them. From the human stories behind racism and prejudice in the Italian American community, she illustrates that dogmatic formulas do not address all situations; understanding among races can only be achieved through direct interaction with each other.

Keywords: feminist, body language, racial profiling, progressive, Italian American, intuition, education, understanding, African American

When the elevator doors opened on a recent morning in a Sheraton Hotel, I took a survey of its occupants: one solitary Black man, well built, handsome, positioned in the left corner. He must have been coming down from the Club Floor, exclusively accessed with a card he had to have had in his hand, or... maybe not.

I make eye contact, smile. He does not return the smile. Has he divined that the smile is not genuine, but rather a nervous tick intended to take the sting of danger out of the moment? Is there any danger here? Would I have smiled at a White man?

Now, I have an unsmiling, well-built, Black man standing in a corner of the elevator. I shift position, place myself smack in front of the control panel. Without moving my head, my eyes locate the alarm button.

We reach the lobby in seconds; this internal dialogue is now

¹ This essay is an excerpt of a longer piece entitled “Shades, Color, and Internal Dialogues in White America” included in the anthology *What Does It Mean to Be White in America?* Editors Gabrielle David and Sean Frederick Forbes, Leaf Press in 2016.

apparently unnecessary; shame-inducing in hindsight yet is as common as the tar on the streets.

I grew up in a Black neighborhood in New York City. I was not taught to be afraid of Black people, yet as a young woman and an adult I learned how to profile. Did I need to react that strongly on the elevator? Probably not. Were some of the reactions to sharing space with a Black man over the top, exaggerated? Likely. Is it better to be safe than sorry? Oftentimes, yes.

This elevator moment had a thousand layers: as a feminist I have been taught to be on my guard in a space alone with any strange man. As a travel writer, I find myself in foreign environments and take safety precautions, but am not usually as self-conscious as I was during this incident.

This series of safety-net reflexes has served me well in the urban environment in which I live. But when the person is Black I am left, at times, with my own sense of guilt. I question, was all of that angst necessary? I brush it away knowing how incredibly complex a simple transaction or potential transaction with a person of a different skin color presents to me as an American.

As the granddaughter of Italian immigrants who fled poverty in Southern Italy at the turn of the century, I was only too aware that they, too, were not considered White upon arrival in *l'America*. My grandparents were quasi-illiterate, my siblings have all earned PhDs and identify as Italians in America or Italian Americans. I speak Italian, study it, and am the only one who frequently visits cousins and friends in Italy, the "old country." I value the bonds with those cousins, as my identity is based on real dialogues and not mythical or nostalgic notions.

Were it not for this link, I might be striving to define myself as more or purely American than as a hybrid, adding more confusion to the mix. It is the hybrid in me that keeps the immigrant experience "green" and alive within me; and, by extension, this consciousness strengthens my empathy toward other immigrants.

My cousins grew up in the same Black neighborhood as I did in South Jamaica, Queens, but their take on our lives diverge vastly from mine. As adults, they joined the "White flight" to Long Island.

One member of my family is very freewheeling with the "N" word, so much so that my mother, who is 97 years old, has to remind him before he begins one of his rants that he is not allowed to utter that word in her house.

His discussions are circular: a younger, Black junior executive in

his office was promoted over him. His story went like this: "They GAVE him a degree from Harvard; all these N's they get in with that affirmative action stuff, they don't deserve it..."

Interrupting his angry blast, I took a chance: "The person you need to be pissed off at is the guy you see in the mirror; you were in the military, you qualified for the GI Bill and could have gotten a college degree for free. But you chose not to. Why? Because you're White you thought you wouldn't have to compete for certain jobs." A jaw-dropping silence ensued.

I didn't do this to be a hero; I did it because he was outrageous. I did it because I understood the hurt behind his rant: it was inconceivable to him that under any circumstances a dark-skinned person could pass him, an olive-skinned son of a Sicilian immigrant.

My cousin's rant was not without ground. The world changed and he did not.

A funny thing happened on his way to being an American: he chose to identify as White and thus he lost his identity.

The fear behind his rant ran neck and neck with cries that "Black is beautiful," and a Civil Rights Movement that forced labor unions to employ fair hiring practices that would include Blacks having an opportunity to compete for those good-paying construction jobs. What started as affirmative action became a threat to the world order among working-class Italian Americans who assumed these jobs would be theirs forever.

What my cousins and others like him did was ditch the real content of their ethnic identities and trade them in for "being White."

They joined the Sons of Italy whose chorus laments that Italians were the perfect immigrants, that their world is diminishing; that pizza and pasta dinners are fading; and yet for all their loyalty to their ethnic backgrounds, most do not speak a word of Italian nor do they take any interest in Italian American culture: books and films.

Since his military service, by the way, that cousin has never stepped foot in Italy though his wife begs him to visit where her own father was born in Naples.

My cousin and his cronies have been reaching for identities as White Americans and, since this is an ill-fitting identity at best, they are left as ethnic orphans without a clue as to who they are, where they come from, and where they fit.

Hence, they carry a burden of resentment toward social movements like affirmative action, Black Lives Matter, and the Civil Rights

Movement. They don't remember when they were the "niggers" in America.

They are plagued by a sense of loss and have become fodder for Donald Trump who has seized on their sense of displacement, using it to pit one group against another: Latinos, Blacks, Muslims, as if Italians had never been there.

Just as I see the Mafia image as both hurtful and limiting, many Italian Americans glorify the Mafia for much the same reason young Black kids imitate the biggest and most successful drug dealers—because of their own sense of impotence. Criminals are power-grabbers in a society that these people have not yet figured out how to negotiate.

After some soul-searching, I created my own curriculum to educate myself about radical and political strains within my ethnic background. The model of increasingly racist and conservative family members was not a good fit for me.

I discovered authors like Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Helen Barolini, educator Leonard Covello, Congressman Vito Marcantonio, labor organizer Angela Bombace, and others whose stories could feed or could nurture a pluralistic vision of who we are.

This helped eradicate the shame of my Italian-American background fraught with a solid wall of stereotypes: as racists, mafiosi, dumbed-down blue-collar workers and pasta-wielding mammas.

To more accurately sketch my world in the mid-'50s and early '60s, I offer this example. One very still afternoon on 116th Drive in South Jamaica, a pick-up truck filled with dark-skinned men stopped in front to repair the street. They all spoke Italian.

My grandmother explained they were Ethiopian or Eritrean. She left out that Mussolini had taken control of parts of North Africa during World War II with dire results. At six I knew enough about politics—familial and global—to know not to question what she said. Back then everyone was Italian—Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the next-door neighbors even if they were Black.

My grandmother observed our commonality: she said "*Siamo tutti gli stessi... siamo dal Sud ...*" We are all the same, we are southerners. She made me understand: mainstream America never ran through South Jamaica.

And I too have tried to weave the commonalities among new immigrants, the disenfranchised, into my creative work with an eye toward linking their experiences with those of my ancestors who arrived poor, illiterate, and ashamed.

That distance from White, middle class America gave me the freedom to continue speaking Italian, eating Italian, and observing “things Italian” as if it were the most natural thing to do in America.

Our Black neighbors neither cared about assimilation nor did they treat us like foreigners. Hanging back in South Jamaica allowed me to be who I am and taught me that class trumps color.

Eventually, we moved to a predominantly Irish Catholic enclave where we became the “spics and the niggers” facing racism for the first time.

Had my parents moved to lily-White Bellerose when I was younger, I would not have developed as strong an ethnic identity as I had the freedom to do. Likely we would have dropped the second language in our pursuit of upward mobility and conformity.

Still, I learned neither hate nor fear at my parents’ dinner table. I learned empathy and sometimes felt confusion. I learned that hardly anyone in America is not an outsider.

As a journalist, I am a spectator, a witness. I have met people in positions of great power and great wealth. I always feel like an impostor. As the Queens Poet Laureate, I represent a borough where more than 60% of the population was born outside the United States, and where 139 languages are spoken, making it a veritable borough of babble.

I consider this nirvana: I eavesdrop, I observe, I take notes of parents who continue speaking their native tongues to their kids who are beginning to insist on answering in English; I see undocumented day workers waiting on corners for work; Indian families covered in saffron-colored powder during the festival of Holi, all clinging to their cultural identities in multi-cultural America.

Bleary-eyed from watching the figure Latinos call “The Orange Man” mobilizing his resentful troops to catapult him to the Presidency, one of the most powerful jobs in the world, I worry.

Trump has stirred up dangerous demons that will continue to haunt and divide White Americans, especially in the depressed heartlands. Their inability to identify or bridge commonalities with their neighbors and immigrants will keep them from grasping what is in their own best interest and thus keep them alienated from one another.

The only hope is that new Americans will preserve a pretty good idea of where they come from and who they are as long as they do not swap their identity in the shuffle to Americanize and vanish.