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Résumé de l'article

Gil Fagiani is a storyteller by nature and by craft, both of which he employs in his essay My Muli-Metamorphoses, a version of which originally appeared in the anthology What Does it Mean to Be White in America (Two Leaf Press). Fagiani traces the dramatic arc of his transformation from a clueless White suburban middle class boy from Connecticut to a left-wing urban revolutionary who co-founded White Lightning, a Bronx-based organization that sought to radicalize white, working-class people. By working side by side with minority ethnic groups as an aide at the Bronx Psychiatric Center; a first marriage to a woman of color; and as the Director of a substance abuse program, Fagiani paves a path that binds his ethnicity with his progressive politics. As a writer, much influenced by Puerto Rican and Black writers, his work reflects the thorny racial separateness that makes trust and understanding distant goals.

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What Does it Mean to Be White in America: My Multi-Metamorphoses[1]

Gil Fagiani († 1945-2018)

If I am not what you say I am, then you are not who you think you are.

James Baldwin

Abstract: Gil Fagiani is a storyteller by nature and by craft, both of which he employs in his essay *My Muli-Metamorphoses*, a version of which originally appeared in the anthology *What Does it Mean to Be White in America* (Two Leaf Press). Fagiani traces the dramatic arc of his transformation from a clueless White suburban middle class boy from Connecticut to a left-wing urban revolutionary who co-founded White Lightning, a Bronx-based organization that sought to radicalize white, working-class people. By working side by side with minority ethnic groups as an aide at the Bronx Psychiatric Center; a first marriage to a woman of color; and as the Director of a substance abuse program, Fagiani paves a path that binds his ethnicity with his progressive politics. As a writer, much influenced by Puerto Rican and Black writers, his work reflects the thorny racial separateness that makes trust and understanding distant goals.

Keywords: racism, Whiteness, radicalize, Bronx, storyteller, Ethnicity, separateness, minority, civil rights, progressive

Over the course of my 70 years, I have experienced being White in a myriad of incarnations: from racist, Black intimidation victim, Civil Rights Movement supporter, honorary soul brother, to the revolutionary comrade, subordinate of the black vanguard, loser, and progressive Italian American.

I grew up in a White, suburban community in Connecticut, and while attending Springdale Elementary School I already knew that dark skin was a sign of inferiority. I viewed Italians—or at least some of them—as bearing that stigma because they seemed to be the darkest,

[1] An earlier version of this essay was published in *What Does It Mean to Be White in America*, edited by Gabrielle David and Sean Frederick Forbes, New York: 2LEAF PRESS, 2016

dumbest, crudest group around. Once, on my paper route, a shirtless Italian construction worker jumped off his bulldozer. "Driving all day in the sun," he said disgustedly, "made me as Black as a *nigger*." And, indeed, his skin was a deep shade of brown which, combined with his kinky hair, made him look darker than many Cubans and Puerto Ricans.

Another time, a WASPY friend's mother was driving us to the beach and my friend suddenly turned around and asked me, "What's the sound of an Italian machine gun?" When I gave him a blank look, he said, "Guinea, guinea, wop, wop, wop," as his mother hollered at him to be quiet. During that period, I didn't think of myself as White, but as Italian, a group whose racial status was murky at best.

As I grew older, I engaged in a form of verbal jousting that my male peers called "ranking," which was similar to what African Americans call the "Dozens." At that time, the ultimate put-down was "Your mamma's name is Beulah...," which was the name of the first TV sitcom to star a Black actress, Ethel Waters, or "Your mamma was born on Pacific Street...," a run-down part of Stamford where Negroes—as they were called by polite society—lived.

I excelled in this "ranking," and embraced the notion that Blacks were an inferior race—and, to my relief—a group with less status than Italians. Denigrating Blacks and acting prideful about being white made me feel secure since all my peers acted the same way and I wanted to be one of them.

In my final year of junior high, I was a member of the track team. During a relay race, as I went to pass my Black opponent, he jabbed his elbow into my ribs. I succeeded in outdistancing him, but I racialized the incident; that is, I saw it not as a rough play but as an expression of Black hostility toward white people. Being white, I surmised, could make me a target for Black intimidation.

As I entered high school, the Civil Rights Movement was exploding into public consciousness. While my father voted Republican, favoring Eisenhower and Nixon, my mother was a New Deal Democrat who strongly supported the Civil Rights Movement. Together we watched TV news images of African Americans being attacked by Southern mobs opposed to desegregation. My mother's compassion for the poor and oppressed, and her willingness to defend unpopular positions deeply impressed me. Following her example, I refuted my earlier racist sentiments and became a White sympathizer of the Civil Rights Movement who felt an obligation to struggle against racism.

As a teenager, I had ferocious arguments with my classmates who claimed that Blacks were an inferior race, while others said that Black civil rights protesters should know their place, and called me a *nigger-lover* for supporting them. I don't recall any of my peers agreeing with my views. I was an insecure, marginal student—both academically and socially—and I strongly identified with the underdog, which in this case was Blacks, who were at the bottom of the social ladder.

Following high school, I attended Pennsylvania Military College (PMC), which was located in Chester, Pennsylvania, about 20 minutes south of Philadelphia. It had been a boomtown during the two world wars, but by the early '60s much of its heavy industry had closed down, and a palpable sense of economic doom had engulfed the city.

When I was a cadet, there were still some White, working-class neighborhoods of Poles, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and Italians. A group of children who looked Eastern European walked by my barracks on their way to school. Their hair was unkempt, their teeth rotten, and they wore raggedy clothes. In suburban Connecticut, I didn't know poor Whites and equated whiteness with being middle class. Now social class became a factor when I thought about White identity.

At PMC, I had access to several Black radio stations in the Philly area and was a loyal listener of WDAS radio DJ and civil rights activist Georgie Woods: "The Guy with the Goods." I was already a big fan of the Motown sound when Georgie and other Black DJs introduced me to a deeper shade of soul music—the Memphis Sound—that featured such artists as Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Carla Thomas, Sam & Dave, and Booker T. and the MGs.

This was when I entered what I think of as my "honorary soul brother phase." The Civil Rights Movement was my religion; Black authors like Claude Brown and James Baldwin were my prophets; Black women were my lust objects, and soul music was my soundtrack.

My sense of being White changed. I saw White people as divided between a reactionary majority who were racist and an enlightened minority, which included myself, who supported the Black freedom struggle. In addition, I began to feel that many aspects of Black culture were superior to that of White Americans; in particular, music, dance, fashion, and the poetry of everyday speech. Playing the reverse snob, I looked down on many Whites as square, uptight, and lame.

I began to immerse myself in left-wing politics. My sense of whiteness now became an ideological construct: Black people, who suffered both class and racial oppression, would eventually lead a socialist

revolution. The Black Panther Party had an exalted status and was seen as the vanguard of the revolution. As a White comrade, my role was to rally and prepare advanced elements in the White community so they would eventually ally with the broader revolutionary movement. Being White, according to this schematic, meant accepting the idea of subordination.

On the other hand, anti-white rhetoric at times reached a fever pitch. One self-described revolutionary, a Puerto Rican cocaine user with a history of mental illness, showed up at a comrade's apartment, waving a pistol and ranting that I was a police agent. Luckily, somebody tipped me off and I stayed away from him, but if circumstances had been different, I might have been killed.

In 1971, I co-founded White Lightning (WL), a Bronx-based organization that sought to radicalize white, working-class people. WL's membership represented a variety of white ethnic groups. Inspired by Blacks and Latino organizations, which used the histories of their people's resistance to oppression to fashion new and positive identities, we studied the histories of various groups of European ancestry. We learned that the Irish, Italian, Polish, and Eastern European Jewish immigrants faced discrimination upon their arrival in "the land of the free," and participated in the great battles for union recognition and social movements that led to the New Deal. We tried to show White ethnics that their history paralleled the history of poor and working-class people, and how ethnic divisions, like present-day racial divisions, had destroyed political unity and discouraged social change.

This was an intense, apocalyptic period in which, for three years, I totally dedicated my life to revolutionary politics. As a result of internal divisions within the organization, burn-out and, most of all, the birth of my first son, I resigned from White Lightning and took a full-time job at Bronx Psychiatric Center (BPC).

I worked at BPC for 12 years and was one of perhaps four White therapy aides out of a Black workforce of—at its peak—several hundred. For the most part, I got along well with my co-workers, but there were times when I suspected that Blacks looked out for Blacks and my well-being was disregarded. I tried to overlook these feelings because they ran counter to my leftist sympathies, and because I didn't like the ugly, primitive feelings of bitterness and betrayal they stirred up.

Certainly, being an extreme minority had its absurd moments. Once, I was ordered to respond to an emergency on another ward. When I arrived, the hallway was packed with Black therapy aides. A

hulking Black patient was standing in the doorway of his dormitory, cursing and threatening to *bust the ass* of the first person who tried to drag him into the seclusion room. Suddenly, his eyes focused on me and he yelled, "Yeah, you White niggers are the worst!" The aide assigned to that ward was a notorious drunk and, without thinking, he grabbed one of the patient's arms, which set off a melee. The patient slugged three of us. Later I reported to my West Indian nursing supervisor, along with the two coworkers who had also been hit. "You're lucky, Gil, you're White," she said, laughing. "Your injury shows."

Another time, I heard a Black recreational therapist, who drove a new Lincoln and fancied himself a ladies' man, say, "If I were White, I know I'd be rich. If you're White and you're not rich, it's because you're a loser."

By 1986, I moved to Astoria, Queens, to live with my girlfriend, who would become my second wife. Partly due to my relationship with her, and partly as a result of a spontaneous healing process that sought healthy and stabilizing roots, I began to reconnect with my *italianità*—my sense of being Italian American. Even though my mother and other close relatives were born in Italy, for most of my life I had rejected and felt ashamed of my Italian background.

I believed that Italian Americans were always on the wrong side of the political barricades, especially regarding the Civil Rights Movement. Italian American politicians like Philadelphia mayor Frank Rizzo and Newark city councilman Anthony Imperiale made careers out of their virulent antagonism toward the black community. Imperiale once said, "When the Black Panther comes, the White hunter will be waiting." Later, I would learn that, historically, Italian Americans had a rich political legacy that spanned the entire spectrum, from fascism to anarchism and socialism.

Over the years, I would go to Italy 18 times, renew relationships with my family there, study and translate Italian and Italian dialect, and become active in several Italian American organizations. Now when I think about being white, I think first of my ethnic identity. I no longer feel saddled by a whiteness that is shameful, dishonorable, and guilt-inducing.

I still maintain my progressive stance against racism. For example, in 1992, I co-founded Italian Americans for a Multicultural US, an Italian American organization that joined Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans in protesting the Quincentennial Columbus Celebration, which included my appearing twice on *Like It Is,* a TV show dedicated

to showcasing the African American experience and hosted by pioneering Black reporter Gil Noble. As a result of these activities, some members of the Italian community called me a "traitor to my race."

Although I now live with a less intense feeling of whiteness, I recognize that I am less likely to be stopped by the police because I'm perceived as White, and that despite the election of a Black president, the masses of Black people suffer from institutional racism in housing, employment, and the criminal justice system. Thus, I believe there is still a need for an active movement to combat racism.

As a writer, however, I feel my whiteness in a very special and sad way. I have been very influenced by Black and Puerto Rican writers. I write about Blacks and Latinos. Four of my published collections of poetry are peopled mainly by characters who are not White—one is titled *A Blanquito in El Barrio*—A White Boy in Spanish Harlem. And while I recognize that writers tend to be a tolerant group, I still believe the whole literary enterprise—like everything else in our society—suffers from racial separateness and tokenism; a pity, since strong writing and face-to-face encounters among writers can tell the hard truths, and go a long way toward building a foundation for trust and understanding.