“I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me.”

—Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Italian Americans are invisible people. Not because people refuse to see them, but because, for the most part, they refuse to be seen. Italian Americans became invisible the moment they could pass themselves off as being white. And since then they have gone to great extremes to avoid being identified as anything but white, they have even hidden the history of being people of color.

Whether they like it or not, Italian Americans cannot escape the fact that they weren’t always white. They were lynched, burned out of homes, chased, captured and killed by vigilantes and the Ku Klux Klan. At the direction of politicians and businessmen, they were herded into ghettos and then redlined and relocated into acceptable neighborhoods. They were discriminated against by political, social, economic, and religious institutions. And in spite of sharing the experiences of other minorities, many of them have adopted the attitudes and stances of the dominant culture of racism, a culture that maintains control by dividing by difference and uniting by illusion of similarity. By becoming white, they have paid a price, and that price is the extinction of their culture. It is that near extinction of Italian American culture that has enabled them to remain invisible. However, in spite of the efforts of many, Italian Americans are not always invisible, nor can they always control when and how we are seen when they do become visible. What does appear in the mainstream media are stereotypical images that have been created by others and used to control the presentation of what is Italian in the United States.
Against these images are those created by Italian American writers and filmmakers that counter those stereotypes.

The 1989 murder of Yusef Hawkins in Bensonhurst, New York, is a perfect example of what it takes to make Italian Americans visible. As long as African Americans stayed out of Bensonhurst, Bensonhurst remained invisible, a small, provincial island of Italian American culture. When Yusef Hawkins walked into Bensonhurst, he unfortunately was not invisible; when a dead Yusef Hawkins was carried out of Bensonhurst, the neighborhood became a visible representation of the worst of Italian America.

In *Do the Right Thing* (1989), a film by Spike Lee, African American culture is pitted against racist American culture represented by an Italian American pizzeria owner and his sons. There are many statements made in this film, but the most powerful is that racism is as American as pizza. To become white is to buy into a racist insurance fraud. The message is “Become like us, and then you too can be better than those others who cannot become like us. We’ll stop racism against your people, if you help us keep it alive against others.”

Now, of all the ethnic groups in America, why did Spike Lee choose Italians to represent American racism? That is a question that only Lee can answer for certain. Yet I would like to suggest several reasons. That he chose Italian Americans because he knew them as whites from his experience growing up in Brooklyn seems clear. But because he knew them, he also knew they would not gather in numbers to protest the portrayal. But finally, and most importantly, Lee chose Italian Americans because they represented the absurdity of divisions among minority groups. Initial responses by Italian Americans to both the Bensonhurst murder and the Spike Lee film were primarily defensive and reactionary. Why portray us like that? Why use Italian Americans to demonstrate America’s racist philosophy? It’s a short ride from here to the latest distorted representation of Italian American Guido culture on MTV’s *Jersey Shore*.

Is it right? Is it fair? Is it true? These, I feel are the wrong questions to be asking. Like it or not there are Italian Americans who are racist, who in buying into the American dream also swallowed the American illusion that white America is better than colored America. The right questions to ask are “How can the very victims of racism adopt racist ideas?” and “Why don’t Italian Americans present alternative views of relationships between Italian and African Americans?”

A little reading of Italian American history and literature by Italian Americans will demonstrate that in spite of the shades of difference in skin color, Italian Americans share much in common with other minority cultures; those commonalities have been hidden from consciousness by selective portrayals of American history. This ignorance of alternative histories is responsible for the Italian American lawyers who work to destroy labor unions for which their grandparents fought and died to create and preserve. Ignorance of Italian American history invites us to regenerate a racist mentality that insures that white will dominate.