

PERSEPHONE'S DESCENT: PLACE, RACE, AND DIASPORIC SELF-
FASHIONING IN *THE SKIN BETWEEN US*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that *The Skin Between Us* (2006), Kym Ragusa's memoir of her dual heritage as the daughter of an African American mother and a working-class father with southern Italian roots, ventures beyond a patchwork heritage account of identity, uniting the global with the local and the mythic with the historical. Drawing from Dalia Kandiyoti's concept of migrant sites and Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space theory, I show how these competing models of diaspora inform Ragusa's memoir. While its Harlem chapters emphasize enclosure within racialized, gendered boundaries, the Mediterranean prologue and Sicilian epilogue highlight transculturation, or mutually transformative encounters between different ethnic groups. As a crossroads between Europe and Africa and the site of Persephone's descent to the underworld, Sicily constitutes an imaginary space of belonging, enabling Ragusa to link women from both sides of her family through their shared experience of loss and displacement and to affirm her agency as a storyteller.

Keywords: Female Diaspora; Kym Ragusa; Italian American; African American; Mixed Race Memoir.

INTRODUCTION

Does multiculturalism in the US require black erasure? The mixed race memoir seems uniquely suited to explore this question. Yet some of the most famous examples of the genre have fallen prey to the colorblind tendencies of the American patchwork heritage narrative, even as they depict how racialized struggles shape becoming. Take, for instance, James McBride's widely acclaimed memoir, *The Color of Water* (1995). The title recalls Ruth McBride's statement that "God is the color of water," an image that serves not only as a metaphor for racial fluidity, but also as a reference to Ruth's belief that the color of her children's skin does not have to hold them back in life. In valorizing a white mother for whom social mobility depends solely on educational accomplishments, McBride leaves unquestioned a colorblind sentiment that is now widely recognized as a denial of institutionalized racism.

Obama's memoir, *Dreams from My Father* (1995), is another example of a mixed-race memoir that gives readers hope that racial tensions in America could be transcended. It ends with an image of Obama standing between his black brother and his white mother at a wedding that unites people from different ethnic backgrounds, illustrating the extent to which its principal theme—racial conflict in America—has been subordinated to a multicultural ethos. Instead of identifying himself as black, white, or multiracial, Obama refers to himself as “the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas,” just as he would later do in his famous “Race” speech in 2008. His ambiguous self-representation influenced autobiography studies. In an essay on *Dreams from My Father*, Justin Ponder praises Obama for obscuring his racial subject position, reading it as a subversive narrative strategy. Using patchwork as a metaphor for autobiography, he refutes the assumption that autobiographers can “undo racial stereotypes with seamless self-representations,” arguing that “the best autobiographers are those that allow indeterminacy, that permit frayed edges where others can stitch on their own scraps” (78). Citing the reference to the patchwork in Obama's inauguration speech, he concludes that it is a strength rather than a weakness to yield narrative control to others.

Although *The Skin Between Us* (2006) is not nearly as well known as *The Color of Water* and *Dreams from My Father*, its arrival on the literary scene marked a turning point in the history of the mixed-race memoir as one of the few to venture beyond the patchwork heritage model. Published two years before Obama would be sworn into the Oval Office, Kym Ragusa's memoir reflects on her dual upbringing as the daughter of an African American fashion model and a working-class father with Southern Italian roots. While McBride and Obama privilege one parent's story at the expense of the other's, Ragusa weaves broader swathes of her cultural legacy into her narrative, reconstructing both her African American maternal genealogy and her Italian American paternal genealogy. Set in Harlem during the 1970s, the first four chapters tell the story of Kym's upbringing by her African American grandmother, Miriam, a former actress turned neighborhood activist who raises Kym after her daughter moves to Milan for her modeling career. In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, Ragusa's focus shifts to the Italian American

side of her family, to East Harlem, the Bronx, and New Jersey. Both the prologue and epilogue are set in Sicily, home of Ragusa's paternal ancestors and setting of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, the mother-daughter narrative of reunion and separation that has fascinated the author since childhood.

Ragusa began her career as a documentary filmmaker. *The Skin Between Us* can be seen as the synthesis of themes she had explored in her films: *Demarcations* (1991), which Edvige Giunta has called "a visual meditation on personal and cultural boundaries" (2003, 225); *Blood of my Blood*, which juxtaposes her maternal ancestors' forced migration from Africa with the transatlantic journey of her Southern Italian paternal ancestors; *Passing* (1996), her African American grandmother's story of her defiant refusal to pass as white in a diner in North Carolina; *fuori/outside* (1997), Ragusa's first foray into autobiographical terrain, in which she both confronts her Italian American grandmother Gilda about her racism and explores Gilda's memories of her past. Giunta has written that, in Ragusa's films, "race does not solidify as a physical reality" but "takes shape as a constellation of exploratory moments, all interconnected, all equally elusive" (2003, 226). In *The Skin Between Us*, the protagonist's relationship with race vacillates between her desire to escape her skin, an object of perpetual scrutiny, and an acceptance of her multiracial identity, which includes her maternal grandmother's Native American, Chinese, and German ancestry.

Initially, like Obama, Ragusa seems to embrace indeterminacy. In Chapter One, in response to the perpetual question, "What are you?," she juxtaposes neutral markers of racial and ethnic identity with derogatory stereotypes of African Americans and Italian Americans, leaving a space between the two:

Black and Italian. African American, Italian American, American.

Other. Biracial, Interracial. Mixed Blood, Half Breed, High Yellow, Redbone. Mulatta. Nigger, Dago, Guinea. (25)

Ragusa will write from within that space, fashioning a diasporic self through myth, metaphor, and descriptions of place. Indeterminacy is hardly a subversive narrative strategy for her. There are moments when Ragusa gives incomplete accounts of an event

or reflects on the unreliability of her memory. However, these are counterbalanced by her tendency to compensate for the limitations of her knowledge of the past by retelling the stories of her female ancestors, filling in the gaps with her imagination. Rather than allow readers to stitch on their scraps, she prefers to create her own designs. Impatient with how her African American grandmother Miriam tells the story of their ancestor Sybela Owens, a runaway slave, she reimagines it, restoring agency to the woman who had been reduced to the status of an object trafficked by a plantation owner's son. In Ragusa's retelling, Sybela has survived the hell of plantation life and chooses flight, determined to protect her children; she is no different from Persephone, who in Ovid's retelling, chooses to eat the pomegranate seeds that will turn her from "captive girl" into "queen of the underworld," the image with which Ragusa's memoir ends.

The Skin Between Us is also one of the few memoirs to trace relations between African Americans and Italian Americans, two ethnic groups who share a history of racial discrimination in the US and whose affinities in cultural expression and cross-cultural influences have been traced by John Gennari in *Flavor and Soul: Italian Americana at Its African American Edge* (2017). Although in theory Southern Italian immigrants' experience as America's 'dagos' should have prepared them to become allies with African Americans, in practice it did not work that way. As Toni Morrison observed in a now famous essay, "On the Backs of Blacks" (1993), "negative appraisals of the native-born black population" were "the most enduring and efficient rite of passage into American culture" (98). Immigrants from Calabria, Ragusa's paternal grandparents participate in the standard rite of passage to assimilation for non-white immigrants: white flight. They flee from East Harlem to the Bronx and from the Bronx to the suburbs of New Jersey, bringing along Kym and their Puerto Rican daughter-in-law on the last of these migrations without any sense of irony.

For postcolonial scholar Annamaria Scorza, Ragusa manages to heal the rift in her cultural identity by celebrating her hybridity. The photograph of the two grandmothers at a Thanksgiving dinner that frames the memoir, the subject of a lyrical meditation on skin in Chapter One, facilitates the recognition of identity-in-difference,

underscoring for Ragusa and for the reader how both women belong to the same community:

In the photo that Kym holds in her hand, the reaching of her goal is revealed: for them to recognize each other, notwithstanding their differences, through which that skin that at the beginning was the cause of a separation and a division now becomes a shared skin through which the epistemological process is inaugurated that leads us to understand themselves and each other through the contact and the epidermal recognition that confirms belonging to the same community. (122) [author's translation]¹

Scorza, however, ignores the photograph's status as a fantasy of racial harmony that would never be achieved in the author's lifetime. Soon after describing the dinner with her two grandmothers, an anomalous event in her lifetime, Ragusa reflects that "There were storms behind us and there would be darkness ahead of us, but in the photograph all that is held at bay" (25). No mutual recognition or understanding between the two sides of her family had been achieved before the deaths of her two grandmothers, and racial tensions would persist between Italian Americans and African Americans long after the photograph was taken in 1996. *The Skin Between Us* is less the narration of an identity quest than it is a reflection on its transformation through writing: the hybridity Ragusa celebrates, the cross-cultural connections she traces between her Italian American and her African American female ancestors, are products of a journey of memory that is associated with Persephone's descent to the underworld at the end of the book.

Rather than emphasize a fundamental unity that persists despite differences, Ragusa's ekphrastic meditation on identity underscores racial divisions. Staring at the photograph of her two grandmothers, Ragusa thinks:

¹ "Nella foto che Kym tiene in mano viene svelato il raggiungimento dell'obiettivo: riconoscersi, nonostante le loro differenze, per cui quella pelle che all'inizio era motivo di separazione e divisione ora diventa una pelle condivisa, attraverso la quale si inaugura un processo epistemologico che porta a comprendere e a comprendersi tramite il contatto e il riconoscimento epidermico che confermano l'appartenenza a una stessa comunità."

We have *almost* the same color skin. Our skin is the truth that this image has captured. Gilda's thin, wrinkled skin like paper left out in the sun, Miriam's plump, barely lined, mine *always a mark of difference, even here, even though it's not all that different*. Three variations on ivory, yellow, olive, refracted between us like a kaleidoscope. The skin between us: a border, a map, a blank page. History and biology. *The skin between us that kept us apart, and sheltered us against the hurt we inflicted on each other*. The skin between us: membrane, veil, mirror. A shared skin. (25) [author's emphasis]

Skin is also metonymically linked to the geography of a Harlem divided into ethnic zones, with Italian Americans in the east and African Americans in the west: "Its topography is mapped on my body: the borderlines between neighborhoods marked by streets that were forbidden to cross, the borderlines enforced by fear and anger, and transgressed by desire. The streets crossing east to west, north to south, like the web of veins beneath my skin" (26). Through the topoi of skin, place, and myth, Ragusa fashions a diasporic self that supersedes the logic of the one and the many implicit in the patchwork heritage narrative, connecting the global with the local and the mythic with the historical.

Since place plays a crucial role in Ragusa's project of self-fashioning, I use Kandiyoti's notion of "migrant sites," as well as Homi Bhabha's notion of a Third Space, to explain how Ragusa creates diasporic alternatives to the patchwork heritage narrative. Kandiyoti has noted that the term "diaspora" evokes translocal and transnational connectivities that 'ethnic' does not in the US," as the latter "presumes settlement and integration with a 'difference' that does not exceed or challenge US boundaries" (9). Arguing for the centrality of place in diaspora narratives, Kandiyoti uses the term "migrant sites" to refer to an irreconcilable tension between enclosure, "the confinement and containment of ethnoracialized diaspora populations in bordered areas," and translocality, "a sense of place produced by the imagining of overlapping locales" (6). While Harlem functions as a migrant site in Ragusa's memoir, Sicily is represented as a third space of hybridity. By framing the story of her biracial upbringing in the US with evocative descriptions of Sicily, a crossroads between Africa and Italy, Ragusa maps affinities between Italian and African diasporas and reconstitutes her relationship with each, undermining Justin Ponder's assumption that the multiracial

autobiographer's agency is necessarily limited by the stereotypes constitutive of all racial identities.

Much of the literature on Ragusa's memoir focuses on the significance of her return to her ancestral homeland. Citing archival evidence that Italian emigrants traveled on former slave ships,² Teresa Fiore historicizes the connection Ragusa makes in her prologue between the forced migration of her African ancestors and the "barely voluntary" migration of her Italian ancestors (121). For Fiore, the Strait of Messina through which Ragusa's ferry passes in the memoir's opening scene functions as a "pre-occupied space," or a space of re-memory that links old with new histories of Italian migration while reading both through the lens of Italy's postcolonial past. While Fiore is interested in the memoir's historiographic implications, Annamaria Taronna and Evelyn Ferraro take ethnographic and philosophical approaches, respectively. Taronna relies on the trope of the writer as translator to describe Ragusa's aims as a memoirist. She emphasizes how Ragusa transcodes ethnicities by making her hybrid subject position legible within the discourse of the dominant culture, so that the ethnic could no longer be seen in opposition to the American. Ragusa's work counters racist stereotypes through scenes that force the reader to confront the status of race as a social construction and through "ethnographies of Southernness"—motifs of blood, skin, and hair, but also food, accents, and languages (118)—that attest to cross-cultural influences and racial fluidity. In emphasizing the transcultural dimension of Ragusa's memoir and its subversion of generic boundaries, Taronna implies that Ragusa's memoir cannot be categorized as a multicultural memoir, or as a product of two 'minor' literary traditions, Italian American and African American.

In "Southern Encounters in the City: Reconfiguring the South from the Liminal Space" (2020), Evelyn Ferraro invokes Italian sociologist Franco Cassano's concept of "*il pensiero meridiano*" (meridian thinking) to explain the significance of place to the

² Fiore cites a 1898 report on early Italian migrant ships produced by Nicola Malnate, the Inspector of the Port of Genoa. References to this document can be found in Gian Antonio Stella's *Odissee* and in Rosoli's and Grossi's *Il pane duro* (1976).

rewriting of identity in *The Skin Between Us*. The starting point of Cassano's theory is that the South of Italy is capable of self-reflection and should not be viewed solely in relation to the North; its epistemology, values, and relationship with time and space are fundamentally different. He uses the metaphor of the shoreline to describe the style of Southern Italian thought. Unbound by ideological formations that create a sense of cultural belonging, meridian thinking situates itself on the limit of the known world, where a relationship with the other becomes possible: "differences touch each other and the game of the relation with the other becomes difficult and real," (6) [author's translation].³ Ferraro appropriates Cassano's idea of meridian thinking as an encounter with alterity but departs from his exclusive focus on the Mediterranean, tracing connections between southern Italy and other global Souths in Ragusa's memoir. Instances of meridian thinking include dynamic moments of cross-cultural exchange in Harlem and Palermo that destabilize ethnic and racial boundaries (224-225).

While I arrive at the some of the same conclusions as Taronna and Ferraro, my intersectional feminist approach distinguishes my argument from theirs. Both critics overlook how Ragusa's privileging of diasporic female experience enables her to renegotiate her relationship with her roots. Ragusa mobilizes cross-cultural identifications through the third space of gender, linking women on both sides of her family through their shared history of familial oppression as well as through the myth of Demeter and Persephone, whose separation and reunion resonates with the experience of migration and resettlement of women across various diasporas. Fiore's analysis attends to Ragusa's privileging of female identity, but its exclusive focus on the Sicily chapters seems to reify a black Italianness while passing too quickly over Ragusa's Harlem upbringing and her identification with Persephone. Unlike Caterina Romeo, whose afterword to her Italian translation of *The Skin Between Us* explores at length Ragusa's writing of Harlem and Persephone, Fiore subordinates place to space, minimizes the significance of the Greek myth in the novel, and thus misses Sicily's

³ "I diversi si toccano e la partita del rapporto con l'altro diventa difficile e vera."

metaliterary function. Fiore seems to forget that Ragusa returns to Sicily not to reconstruct her roots, but to work on a literary project: she wins a grant to create a film based on the story of Persephone. Since Sicily is the first stage in her journey as writer, her epilogue is highly self-reflexive, culminating, through a reflection on Ovid's representation of Persephone, in an insight about the power of the diasporic woman writer to transgress cultural taboos.

Against the above-mentioned scholars, then, I argue that the Sicily chapters constitute less an ethnographic or historiographic project of revision than they serve as a means for Ragusa to restage her cultural in betweenness and to enact a feminist fantasy that unites her two grandmothers, and by extension, her Italian self with her African self. Perhaps more importantly, as the site of Persephone's alleged abduction by Hades, the setting permits Ragusa to affirm her own agency as a diasporic woman writer by imagining Persephone as a subversive border crosser who chooses her own story. In what follows, I offer a gendered analysis of the dynamics of place, race, and diasporic self-fashioning in *The Skin Between Us* in the hope of complicating the popular conception of the memoir as a tribute to a multicultural, biracial identity.

HARLEM AS A MIGRANT SITE

In *Migrant Sites*, Dalia Kandiyoti identifies enclosure as “the predominant theme and literary form” of most diasporic narratives and “the representation of ‘migrant’ or translocal consciousness its constitutive counterpoint” (6). Enclosure “encompasses racialized spatial segregation and immobilization and literary modalities that ‘enclose;’ that is, they center around discursively bordered, particularized loci, such as regionalism and urban writing” (10). Ragusa's memoir exemplifies Kandiyoti's theory. Enclosed by a prologue and epilogue set in Sicily, most of the chapters are set in Harlem, an isolated, racially segregated zone within New York City. Having come of age in Harlem of the 1970s, after “Italian Harlem” (East Harlem) had moved north to the Bronx and black Harlem (West Harlem) had experienced a steep decline in revenue, Ragusa locates racism as the source of antagonism between the two communities: Miriam “believed, as many other black people did, that Italian Americans were nothing but

mafiosi, racists, and republicans” and Gilda cries out in shame when she realizes that her son is dating “a nigger, a *moulignan*” (29). Reflecting on her parents’ courtship in 1964, Ragusa recalls that interracial marriage was illegal in some states and “even in New York City, neighborhoods, schools, and social scenes were still resolutely segregated” (28). The other history of Italian American and African American relations in Harlem is elided in Ragusa’s account: one would never know that Italian American antifascists had once marched alongside African Americans in protest of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.

Harlem is represented as a dynamic place that has been transformed over the course of the twentieth century into a site, a term Kandiyoti uses to denote both a unit of space “prefigured and maintained to legitimize a particular order, whether of empire, nationalism, or social hierarchies” and “the transformation of a dynamic place into a site of fixed content in the dominant imagination” (40). While her two grandmothers still relish their memories of Harlem—Miriam associates it with the glamour, creativity, and wealth of certain black individuals during the Harlem Renaissance; Gilda, with a cultural and familial belonging rooted in *campanilismo*—Kym and her mother see in Harlem stereotypes of the urban ghetto: bodega counters encased in Plexiglass windows; courtyards strewn with glass and junk; double-locked, bolted doors.

Place as a container of a class is as important a motif in Ragusa’s memoir as it is in *The Great Gatsby*, a novel that explores the seductive effects of the American Dream on those for whom it was never intended. In Harlem, as in Fitzgerald’s infamous valley of ashes, beauty is “a means of transcending mere survival” for working-class women (Ragusa, 75). Along with a voracious appetite for literary classics, Miriam and her daughter also share a predilection for fashion and use their beauty to “seek out their dreams, to live those dreams, however partially and temporarily” (Ragusa, 75-76). Unlike Fitzgerald, Ragusa shows the positive side of this fantasy. The beauty of the racially mixed women on the African American side of her family allow the latter to breach racial taboos by imagining possibilities for themselves that were not supposed to exist for women of color before the Civil Rights Movement.

As imagined places of community, West Harlem and East Harlem exist in a tension that is analogous to the one that existed between West Egg and East Egg in *The*

Great Gatsby. West Harlem, like Fitzgerald's fictionalized West Egg, was produced by an influx of new money and ideas in African American society. Observing how Mae's stories omitted Harlem's decline after the stock market crash of 1929, Ragusa writes that "it existed for her, and for her impressionable daughter, in an eternal present of tuxedo-clad trumpet players and pale yellow chorus girls, literary salons in grand apartments, women in furs strolling down Lenox Avenue" (63). On the other hand, East Harlem, like East Egg, represented the triumph of blood ties and the continuity of Old World European traditions: "The mythology of East Harlem, Italian Harlem: it was safe, it was clean, it was 'our' place, the family was together, everybody looked out for each other, so safe you didn't even have to lock your door" (119). Ragusa deconstructs this mythology by recognizing East Harlem's racialized dynamics of inclusion/exclusion. She remembers the refusal of Italian American landlords to rent to Puerto Rican tenants in the 1930s and the eruption of race riots when schools began to be integrated. Her own family's betrayal occurs in the economic boom after World War II, when Italian Americans were considered white enough to be offered bank loans. Her great uncles buy a two-story family house in the Bronx, and are joined by her grandparents a few years later; yet it is they who feel betrayed when working-class black families move into the low-income housing projects built after their tenement buildings had been razed to the ground. Later in the same chapter, she recalls how, during her and her father's visits to Luisa's apartment in East Harlem, Italian American residents cast disapproving looks at her, muttering "*vergogna*" (133).

Enclosure also manifests itself in gendered spaces of segregation within African American and Italian American communities. In Ragusa's memory of her early childhood in Harlem, men are largely absent while women are the pillar of the community: they take care of each other's children, run errands for elderly tenants, scrub stairwells, hold multiple jobs, and gather in Miriam's apartment to discuss strategies for dealing with recalcitrant landlords. They also protect girls from male predators. Kym and her friends' burgeoning awareness of their sexuality coincides with their awareness of the danger lurking outside, in streets dominated by men:

We girls were learning a new language in that courtyard, protected on three sides by the gray walls of our building and various mothers and grandmothers who would peek their heads out the window to make sure we were there. But the courtyard was also open to the street, and I remember sometimes men would stop and watch us while we played, until they were hissed away by one of the grownup women coming in or out of the building. (50)

Protected is the key word here; the world lurking outside the courtyard is far more menacing for girls of color than the world bordered by the gray walls of their building. “Teenagers turning to prostitution to survive, toddlers molested by drunken uncles,” and “girls who were raped and thrown off rooftops” (50) are among the dangers that have become routine in a post-civil-rights Harlem where buildings had been allowed by the city to fall into disrepair and tenants’ rights were ignored. From a young age Ragusa learns to fear “the dark basement where no one ever went” (80) and the barely functional elevator in which a junkie once held a knife to her throat as her mother emptied her pockets.

Ragusa relates the violation of black female bodies to black male disenfranchisement. In telling the story of Samuel Stevens’s “courtship” of Miriam—a story linked to the myth of Demeter and Persephone through the motif of abduction—Ragusa emphasizes her grandfather’s precarious, nomadic existence and his unrealized ambitions:

He arrived in Pittsburgh from a mountain town in North Carolina, where the people had been mixed, black and Cherokee, for generations. He came to find work in the steel mills, though he dreamed of being an actor. The mills were hot and loud, every night he came home with the echo of machines pounding inside his head. He had quit inside of a year and began working odd jobs while he studied acting with a white teacher downtown who didn’t mind giving lessons to coloreds— all money was green, after all. But there aren’t a lot of roles for a black man in the theaters of Pittsburgh, and he can’t afford to move to one of the bigger like New York or Chicago, not just yet. As a last resort he applies for the job of drama coach at Miriam’s high school and to his surprise, he gets it. (90)

In this brief biographical sketch of Samuel Stevens, Ragusa describes the collective plight of black men during the Great Migration. However, when she tells her grandmother’s story, she presents it as singular, “a Pittsburgh tragedy” (92): sixteen-

year-old Miriam, an “honor student, pride of the family, beauty of the neighborhood” (88), tries out for a part in a school play against her parents’ wishes. Her drama teacher, an older black man, invites her to his apartment for extra coaching on a Saturday afternoon. She accepts, not knowing that he will drug her drink and rape her while she is unconscious, and that, a year later, she will be married to her rapist, living in the suburbs of Los Angeles with him and her young daughter, Kym’s mother. The enclosure of her intellect and talent in the well-worn black female plot of sexual victimhood, marriage, and motherhood is what renders her story tragic; Ragusa imagines the young Miriam “practicing her trigonometry on the bus home from school, catching up before church services, a copy of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* hidden in an open Bible” (88). Like Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, who was influenced by Woolf’s invention of Shakespeare’s sister in *A Room Of One’s Own*, Ragusa laments the life that her grandmother could have lived, her unrecognized genius. At the same time, by telling her story, she seeks to “resurrect” “Miriam’s girlhood body made of dreams and promises and hope,” to “bring flesh back to the bones” (92). Here, as in other places in her narrative, Ragusa acknowledges how her reconstruction of her female ancestors’ lives could never recuperate their losses.

Despite their lived experiences of sexual and racial oppression, the women on the African American side of Ragusa’s family refuse to be trapped in narratives not of their own making. Kym’s great-grandmother Mae, the darkest of five daughters at a time when admission to parties in Pennsylvania required that the skin color of guests be lighter than the color of a paper bag, is a flapper during the Harlem Renaissance who travels the country and takes five husbands, abandoning each when her appetite for sex and companionship is sated. Miriam channels her writing ambition into local journalism in L.A. and saves enough money for her and her daughter’s bus ride to New York City, leaving Samuel Stevens behind. In Harlem, she resumes her writing career and becomes a public relations consultant for a famous nightclub frequented by the likes of Sammy Davis Jr. and Kim Novak. In her elder years, she throws herself into activism to restore the former grandeur of Harlem’s buildings and protect tenants’ rights, throwing fundraisers and victory parties for councilmen at her apartment. Kym’s

mother, however, is unimpressed by the Harlem that awaits her and Miriam after their departure from California. She makes it her primary objective to leave, landing a modeling job that takes her to Milan. The different relationship Kym's mother and grandmother have with Harlem constitutes another point of identification with the myth of Persephone and Demeter: Kym's mother disappears and reappears in a cyclical fashion while Miriam remains behind, tending to the needs of the community.

Miriam's determination and resilience are not shared by Gilda, Kym's Italian American grandmother. Their stories unfold in separate chapters, reflecting in literary form the segregation of Italian Americans from African Americans. Unlike Miriam, Gilda does not dare to dream of becoming an artist; she surrenders herself to the script written for her by her parents and their parents long before she was born: "As a girl, Gilda learned from her mother how to keep a spotless home, how to care for her younger siblings, how to feed a growing family, all preparations for the time when she would have a husband and children of her own" (123). As the first one of Luisa's children born in America, she learns to read and write English, but her high school education is abruptly interrupted because of the entry of a man into her life. Unlike Miriam's parents, who entertain high hopes for their daughter, Gilda's parents believe education is wasted on girls and arrange a marriage between Gilda and a boy from Calabria, following village customs. Gilda does not resist this destiny, or Ragusa fails to imagine such a resistance:

I don't know if Gilda ever imagined such a possibility for herself, if she ever truly believed her life held other options than that which was presented to her at sixteen. Her girlhood was over- she said goodbye to her textbooks and notebooks and prepared to become a wife. (125)

Her enclosure of Gilda in the realm of the domestic is a dramatic point of departure from her writing of other women in the narrative, whom she endows with self-determination.

Arguably, Ragusa's uneven treatment of her two grandmothers is related to her grandmother's rejection of her because of racial difference. Her sense of outsidership is magnified when she lives with her father's family in the suburbs of New Jersey. Reflecting on her relationship with Gilda during this period, Ragusa writes: "There was

a certain distance between me and Gilda that never seemed to close, an almost imperceptible formality that I could sense but never quite name or understand. I felt often that I was more a guest in the house than a part of the family” (213). Excluded from the tight-knit circle formed by Gilda, her aunt Angela, and her cousin Marie, whose inside jokes are lost on her, the teenage Kym accuses her grandmother of favoritism and receives a beating from her father. Her suspicions about Gilda’s ambivalence are confirmed when Gilda, who had fought against a racist board of directors so that Kym could gain admission into the local country club’s swimming pool, articulates her hope that their new neighbors not be black.

Ragusa’s desire to recuperate her *Italianità* is at odds with her recognition of the Italian American community’s betrayal of the African American community. This tension is never resolved, even at the end of the Harlem chapters, when her father officially recognizes her as his biological child in a court ceremony—a symbolic gesture that brings a false sense of closure to the narrative, as he has never acknowledged his own motives in keeping his daughter’s existence a secret from his mother for the first two years of her life or the painful effects of this secrecy on Kym. Yet her impossible desire for belonging motivates her writing of Harlem as translocal. For the most part, translocality manifests itself in lyrical digressions in which Ragusa identifies herself with women from diasporas south of the US: her Caribbean nanny, whose singing voice is associated with the voice she will later develop as a writer, or the Haitian women whose “canopy of hands” (146) stretch towards the image of the Madonna at the Mount Carmel in East Harlem. Through her consciousness of migrancy, Ragusa transmutes her experience of racism and ethnic non-belonging into a valorization of cross-cultural identifications and black female agency. The hundreds of people who march in the procession in East Harlem, most of whom are women, are there to pay homage to an image of the Madonna who is more like the Black Madonna honored in folk festivals throughout the Mediterranean world despite her porcelain face.⁴ Ragusa emphasizes

⁴ As Elisabetta Marino has argued, the Black Madonna in Italian American culture, although Christianized, has “been persistently associated with the articulation of empowering strategies, with antagonism towards any kind of

that she is “not an image of selfless maternity, but one of absolute sovereignty and limitless power. She is the center here, not Christ, not the Father” (145). Watching Italian women carrying tiers of lighted candles on their heads, Ragusa is reminded of Africa: “It’s such an African image to me, a woman carrying what is most precious on her head: water, grain, fire” (143). Her diasporic consciousness metaphorizes East Harlem: “Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Haitians” move together “like an exhalation of breath” across a neighborhood that is “almost a geologic formation, stratified by waves of migration, years of occupation and contestation, different communities who have all called it home” (144-145). Women sing in different languages, Spanish and Italian, French and Creole. Their songs grow more frenzied when the procession halts at the foot of the church and the male Italian American marching band breaks into the Italian national anthem, as though they struggle not to surrender their power to the violence of male nationalism.

Translocality is also embodied by Luisa, Ragusa’s Italian great-grandmother, who brings to East Harlem the small mountainous village in Calabria from which she migrated as an adolescent in the second decade of the twentieth century. “If East Harlem was the village transplanted, Luisa was the village embodied,” Ragusa writes, reflecting that “whatever sense of tradition and connection my father feels to his Italian heritage comes from his grandmother, from the words on her tongue, the labor of her hands, the epic struggle she enacted each day of re-creating life as she had known it in Calabria within the confines of her gray tenement building” (131). Luisa’s efforts to recreate Calabria in East Harlem parallel Miriam’s efforts to restore Harlem to its former grandeur. Both women are engaged in a mission of cultural preservation that they believe will give meaning to future generations. Each has been influenced by the other’s culture: Luisa’s work as a root woman evokes Africa, while Miriam’s knowledge of the myth of Demeter and Persephone evokes Sicily, the home of Luisa’s ancestors. Although they live a generation apart, each woman is married against her will to her abuser and

patriarchal restraints, with the healing of deeply ingrained divisions (of gender, class, ethnicity), and with the celebration of diversity in unity” (39-40).

finds a way out of the marriage, becoming the head of her own household at a time when to be a single mother was to be a pariah by the standards of the dominant American culture.

In an interview with Livia Tenzer in 2002, Ragusa spoke about how Gilda's "revelation about her father's physical abuse of her mother illustrates the ways in which an impoverished man still had power over an immigrant woman through the force of his body" (214). Southern Italian women, like African American women, too often bore the brunt of their husbands' economic powerlessness. By drawing attention to a gender-based system of oppression that traverses Harlem's ethnic, racialized boundaries, *The Skin Between Us* hints at an alliance that could have developed between southern Italian female immigrants and working-class African American women despite linguistic and cultural boundaries.

SICILY AS A THIRD SPACE

Third Space theory, an interdisciplinary tool of analysis, originated in Postcolonial Studies, in the work of Homi K. Bhabha. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha made hybridity the starting point of his theory of cultural identity, emphasizing how cultures influence and transform each other. His theory was controversial in that it unsettled the binary between colonizer and colonized that postcolonial critics relied upon in their own writings, showing how the two are already imbricated in the field of cultural production.

Bhabha conceived of the Third Space as enabling the dynamic interplay between cultures through a deferral of meaning. He relates it to a lack of transparency inherent in language and communication:

The pact of interpretation is never simply an act of communication between the I and the You designated in the statement. The production of meaning requires that these two spaces be mobilized in the passage through a Third Space, which represents both the general conditions of language and the specific condition of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be conscious. What this unconscious relation introduces is an ambivalence in the act of interpretation. (53)

The Third Space is linked to a Derridean idea of *différance*—impossible to pin down, yet responsible for the instability of meaning within linguistic systems and semiotic contexts. Its existence, for Bhabha, “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People” (54). As hybridity’s ontological ground, it shatters myths of national, cultural, and racial purity.

Third Space theory is useful for conceptualizing Ragusa’s memoir, which concerns itself with relations between diasporas, with liminal, in-between spaces, as expressed through its central conceit of skin and its allusions to Persephone, a figural border crosser who divides her time above and below the earth, alternately celebrated and mourned by her mother. It is not altogether incompatible with Kandiyoti’s idea of migrant sites; both Bhabha and Kandiyoti would agree that the old cannot simply be replaced or erased by the new, that the migrant subject inhabits multiple places simultaneously. Yet Kandiyoti has distinguished her understanding of migrant sites from a third-space typology in which “everything comes together” in “a zone of hybridity,” emphasizing that in her analysis of US diaspora narratives, enclosure and openness “clash and collide” (43). Both models of diaspora inform *The Skin Between Us*. While the Harlem chapters engage and destabilize Harlem as a site, Ragusa’s prologue and epilogue, set near and within Sicily, respectively, partake of a third-space chronotope. Sicily is a discursive space that permits Ragusa to contest the ethnoracialized boundaries of her remembered Harlem with images of openness; a liminal space that, in the words of Bhabha, give rise to “something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meeting and representation” (1994, 211). While the Harlem chapters are rich with ethnographic insights and journalistic detail, the descriptions of Sicily consist mainly of surface impressions, stylized poetic images that underscore Sicily’s status as a textual construction and remind the reader that Ragusa’s true home is language.

The prologue reflects on the textual creation of a diasporic self through the topos of the journey. While on a ferry crossing the Strait of Messina, Ragusa locates her origins in displacement, in the forced migration of her maternal ancestors and the “barely

voluntary” migration of her paternal ancestors to the US. Although the status of Italians as a diasporic group was fiercely debated at the time that Ragusa was writing, Ragusa makes her own position clear by connecting the Italian American experience of separation with the African American experience: “Two homelands left far behind” (2). However, this shared history is not enough for Ragusa to experience belonging. Ragusa’s identity splits in two when she becomes aware of the disapproving looks of the Italians on the ferry:

What must I have looked like to them? A woman alone, already an oddity. Already suspect. My dark, corkscrew hair was pulled back, something I had learned to do whenever I went someplace where I didn’t want to stand out, which for most of my life had been that time, I had that feeling, all too familiar, of wanting to climb out of my skin, to be invisible (18-19).

This reflection on her gendered, racialized difference gives way to a reflection on her own history of migrations within the US, where she had spent much of her childhood traveling between the homes of the now deceased Miriam and Gilda, “trying and not always succeeding to negotiate the distance—cultural, historic, linguistic—between them” (19). Towards the end of the prologue, she communicates her goal as a writer: by returning to Sicily, she would find her way back to Harlem.

Yet in Sicily, Ragusa is “unhomed,” Bhabha’s term for “the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world... that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (1992, 142). Palermo is Harlem’s double, engendering cross-racial, cross-cultural identifications that have been repressed in the US. Palimpsestic, it bears the traces of multiple histories, “the site of thousands of years of invasion and violation, accommodation and amalgamation” alternately plundered by “Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, and French” (Ragusa, 234). Wandering the ancient capital, Ragusa connects the words she hears in Sicilian dialect, “words of Arabic origin,” with her grandparents’ home in the Bronx and New Jersey, and marvels that her rich heritage could have been disparaged in the US. For the first time in the narrative, she identifies her face with that of Gilda and her father, and sees it reflected in the faces of the people around her. In *La Kalsa*, “the Harlem of Palermo,” where

working-class Sicilians and immigrants from Africa and Asia live, Ragusa sees a black female prostitute who has painted her face white, a reworking of the blackface trope popular in Western culture. When she asks her Sicilian friends why prostitutes choose to hide their faces, he responds, “To make themselves more beautiful to Sicilian men,” (Ragusa, 236) naturalizing racist beauty standards that Ragusa’s African-American mother and grandmother have never ascribed to; their focus on their physical beauty and flattering fashions, which might be read by white feminists as a sign of internalized oppression, is actually a form of defiance against the transnational erasure of black women’s beauty. She also sees black African and local Sicilian boys playing joyously in a “large, open field,” an image that serves as an ironic counterpart to the scenes of racial warfare described in the Harlem chapters. Harlem is continually evoked and defamiliarized in Ragusa’s description of Palermo, but it is her aesthetic contemplation of the boys in the field that—in contradistinction to her aesthetic contemplation of the photograph of her two grandmothers—constitutes an unhomey moment in the narrative. The “shock of recognition of the world” in the home and “the home in the world” (Bhabha 1992, 142) disorients Ragusa: “For a moment I lost track of where I was—was this Palermo, or Cairo, or Lagos, or Harlem?” (237). Harlem, Ragusa’s home, becomes the world in this moment.

Ragusa concludes her memoir by returning to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, a story which has held a central place in Italian American and African American women’s writing.⁵ Whereas in Chapter 5 she read Persephone as “the good daughter split in two,” forced to shuttle between two incompatible worlds, by the epilogue Persephone has become a representation of the diasporic female writer (107). The distance between the two grandmothers’ worlds collapse in her final retelling of the myth, which is introduced with a Sicilian proverb: *Cu bona reda voli fari, di figghia*

⁵ In “Persephone’s Daughters,” Edvige Giunta emphasizes the centrality of the myth in Italian American women’s writing, citing Susan Caperna Lloyd, Lucia Perilla, Diane di Prima, and Joanna Herman. According to Giunta, Italian American women have a privileged relationship with the myth because of its roots in a Greek-inspired Mediterranean culture (769). The myth has also resonated with African American writers such as Toni Morrison, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Rita Dove, who have incorporated its central motif of mother-daughter separation and reunion in their own works (eg, *Beloved*, *Mother Love*, “The Anaid” and “In the Mecca”).

fimmina avi a cumincinari. Ragusa gives an approximate translation, “A good descent starts with a girl,” and reflects on the meaning of descent, creating a female genealogy that connects the Italian side with the African side: “Sybela and her unnamed mother, Luisa and Gilda, Miriam and my mother, my mother and me: a lineage of mothers and daughters losing each other and finding each other over and over again” (237). Their common heritage is “the loss, the search, the story,” which Ragusa as memoirist has taken it upon herself to reconstruct, descending into an underworld that has become synonymous with memory.

CONCLUSION: PERSEPHONE'S DESCENT

In the preface of *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa uses patchwork as a metaphor for the writing of her narrative: “I have woven a narrative out of many bits and pieces: fragments of memory; family stories passed down through the generations and altered in the process with each telling; interviews with family members; snippets of adult conversation I overheard as a child” (7). Despite her reliance on this multiculturalist trope and the cover’s image of white hands folded into and resting over black hands, *The Skin Between Us* does not encourage us to reach comforting conclusions about our diverse heritage. What Edvige Giunta has written about *fuori/outside*—that it “does not subscribe to what Louise DeSalvo has called ‘the recovery narrative,’ a narrative that exonerates the reader/viewer of any social or political responsibility” (2003, 229)—also holds true for Ragusa’s written memoir. Kym’s status as an outsider in Italian America is unchanged by the events in the narrative; her female ancestors come together only in the memoir’s mythopoetic, metatextual ending, which plays on the literal and figural meanings of descent. Descent as blood lineage is transmuted, through the final allusion to the myth of Demeter and Persephone, into descent as re-memory, a meaning consistent with Stuart Hall’s notion of cultural identity as “a ‘production,’ which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, and not outside, representation” (222). Displacement and the desire to recuperate losses incurred by migration through storytelling constitute the common heritage of African American and southern Italian American women.

Ragusa recuperates her *Italianità* through her rewriting of myth, and not through a reconciliation with her father, who remains a mysterious, aloof presence despite their time together in New Jersey. In Chapters 6 through 8, she alludes to his heroin addiction, his PTSD from his service in the Vietnam War, and his propensity for violence, but she does not flesh out his character. Instead, she claims as her literary father Ovid, an ancient Latin poet who spent the last few years of his life in exile, having been banished by Emperor Augustus to a remote province on the Black Sea. In Ovid's retelling of the myth, Persephone is more than the hostage of Hades; she steals the pomegranate from his kingdom, enabling her own return "to the realm of the ancestors, the realm of memory" (Ragusa, 238). Ragusa finds Ovid's Persephone compelling because of her transgressive desire for knowledge, which is eroticized in her imagination—"She breaks open the rough red skin of the fruit, and puts the seven seeds in her mouth" (238)—and, more importantly, because she chooses her own fate, as Ragusa announces in the last sentence of her memoir. Fiore has written that Persephone's underground journey is "not as convincing as the kind of spatial experiences and rethinking of space that Ragusa offers on other occasions," "partly because of its brief appearance in the novel" (133), but the Ovidian version of the Persephone theme is alluded to on multiple occasions throughout the Harlem chapters, albeit implicitly, through the defiant decisions of Kym's mother and Sybela to live elsewhere. Moreover, Ragusa's representation of Harlem as a migrant site, with its oscillation between thematics of enclosure and translocality, restages Ovid's depiction of Hades as a confining yet transformative, potentially liberating space.

Perhaps more copies of *The Skin Between Us* would have been sold in the US had it ended with a scene of racial harmony rather than with Persephone's subversive decision to eat the pomegranate seeds. Yet Ragusa's determination to tell an intergenerational story of loss and betrayal is more relevant than ever in a post-Trumpian age of Black Lives Matters, when racist sentiments in Italian American communities have been reignited by the destruction of Columbus monuments across

the US.⁶ Her memoir confronts us with the inadequacy of multiculturalist discourses that attempt to smooth over divisions within and between African American and Italian American communities, even as it offers hope that through creative acts of storytelling—what Toni Morrison has referred to as “re-memory”—members of both communities can reclaim their histories and finally speak to each other.

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⁶ Fred Gardaphé's recent article, “Beyond Columbus: An Italian American Wake Up Call” (2020), discusses how the removal of Columbus statues across the US has forced Italian Americans to re-evaluate their problematic identification with a man who had never been a part of Italian history.

Victoria Tomasulo |

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