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The Hybrid Identity of an American Woman: Ethnicity and Gender in Kym Ragusa's *The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging*

Francesca de Lucia

Kym Ragusa is a documentary filmmaker of Italian American and African American descent. In her memoir, she describes not only her own growth as an individual with a mixed background, but also evokes the histories of her paternal and maternal families. This essay focuses on three particularly relevant aspects: the elaboration of Ragusa's identity as a biracial woman in relation to racialized ideas of beauty and femininity, the figures of female empowerment represented by Ragusa's two grandmothers as well as by the archetypal characters of Persephone and the Madonna of Mount Carmel, and on the influence of Ragusa's filmmaking on her writing, which indeed borrows structures and techniques from cinematic language. *The Skin Between Us* blends different literary and cultural traditions drawn from the two minorities constituting Ragusa's background. Gender here is complicated by a double ethnic allegiance.

Kym Ragusa's autobiographical text *The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* (2006) is the self-portrayal of a woman whose personal history is complicated by her belonging to two minorities occupying different positions within the racial hierarchy of American society. In her work, she describes growing up as the daughter of a black mother and a third-generation Italian American father of Sicilian/Calabrese descent. The interplay between these two aspects leads to the fashioning of a mixed brand of American identity as the result of the joint influence of Italian American and African American traditions. In *The Skin Between Us*, she chronicles her development as a biracial indi-

vidual, not only focusing on the construction of her own identity, but also tracing the history of her parents' families and highlighting her oscillation between two distinct, albeit contiguous ethnic worlds. I intend to discuss three of the most significant aspects emerging from *The Skin Between Us*: first, the construction of its protagonist's identity as a woman in the light of racialized images of beauty and femininity; second, the quest for archetypal figures of female empowerment; and finally the role played in Ragusa's writing by her main activity as a documentary filmmaker.

Ragusa's condition as a biracial individual is unusual, as the white part of her heritage is linked to a group whose whiteness was questioned during the early stage of its settlement in the United States because of a perceived geographical and cultural proximity between Africa and Southern Italy. The notion of the ambiguous racial position of Italian Americans and the sense of cultural and racial continuity between Southern Italy (in particular Sicily) and Africa run through *The Skin Between Us* from the first page on. Ragusa imagines Sicily, a region suspended between the West and Africa, as the symbolic conjunction of her paternal and maternal ancestries:

Sicily is the crossroads between Europe and Africa, the continent from which my maternal ancestors were stolen and brought to slavery in Maryland, West Virginia and North Carolina. Two sets of migrations, one forced, one barely voluntary. Two homelands left far behind. Two bloodlines meeting in me. (18)

Because of its history of repeated foreign oppression and underdevelopment, Sicily in particular and Southern Italy in general have been seen as belonging to Africa rather than Europe, a prejudicial view that helps explain the position of racialized inferiority held by Italian immigrants, especially in the context of early-twentieth century nativism.

As rendered evident by the subtitle of the memoir, one of the key themes of *The Skin Between Us* is beauty in relation to race. Ragusa links the idea of the Southern Italians' potential "African-ness" to one of the dominant motifs of African American women's writing, that is, the aspiration to conform to a white aesthetic ideal. Ragusa recalls that as a child, she longed for the light skin and blond hair of her dolls. This idea is found for instance also in Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, which shows the disruptive effects of the imposition of a white-centered beauty canon on young African American women while at the same time suggesting the possibility of a complete rejection of such a canon. However, Ragusa and her family broaden this sense of aesthetic double consciousness by attributing some of her racial characteristics to her

father, as indicated by the following passage: "Miriam railed against my father, whose hair is also tightly curled, for ruining mine, for tainting it, those damned Sicilians and their African blood" (56). In this context, it is Ragusa's light-skinned African American grandmother Miriam who hints at miscegenation. Moreover, in some examples of African American women's writing, such as Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1936), straight hair is seen as desirable by some African American characters within an internal racial hierarchy, because it denotes a higher quantity of Caucasian blood. Paradoxically, here a white father is held responsible for kinky hair, emphasizing the sense of racial ambiguity of Southern Italians in the United States. Coming from a family of light-skinned, lower middle-class African Americans for whom "African heritage was both emblem of honor and source of deep shame" (67), Miriam expresses the attitude of "colorism," which Alice Walker describes as the "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (290).

The emphasis on looks and racial characteristics dominates Ragusa's childhood, as she undergoes constant physical scrutiny on the part of Miriam and other female relatives. Consequently, her physical identity becomes fragmented as her various features are praised or dismissed and she is implicitly measured against a Caucasian model of beauty. Throughout Ragusa's growth as a young woman of color, beauty is seen both as a means of survival and social ascent and also a potential threat, as she absorbs the notion of having to keep a strict control over her body and her developing sexuality. In this perspective, as noted by Judith Butler:

Femininity is not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (232)

This is visible, for instance, in the episode where Miriam admonishes her granddaughter on the conduct appropriate for a "pretty girl," in a context of vulnerability due not only to gender but also to race. Ragusa often associates with her appearance the notion of a "metamorphosis." On one occasion this indicates a form of racial shift, alluding to the process of hair-straightening which relevantly takes place before Kym's participation in the "white flight" with her father's family. On another occasion the "metamorphosis" is her eventual rejection of conventional aesthetical canons as well as traditional notions of acceptable feminine behavior in favor of a new identity, dictated by punk fashion, which she considers "in-between." While Ragusa refers in this case to racial and sexual ambiguity, it is significant to observe that the expression "in-

“between” is used by scholars of ethnicity such as John Higham and Robert Orsi to designate the racial status of Italian Americans.

Throughout her narrative, Ragusa tries to overcome the sense of personal laceration she feels as a woman descending from two different minorities by seeking female figures that will enable her to reconcile the jarring elements of her identity and possibly become models of female empowerment. These are, in the context of Ragusa’s own life history, her two grandmothers, the African American Miriam and the Italian American Gilda, who emerge as the characters dominating *The Skin Between Us*, as well as the two mythical female figures represented by Persephone and the Madonna of Mount Carmel. Ragusa’s grandmothers and the unlikely friendship they develop late in life represent a connection to roots as well as the possibility of the resolution of Ragusa’s interior conflict. The two ancestral personas represented by Miriam and Gilda come to symbolize the two different strands of Ragusa’s identity, respectively dominating the first part of *The Skin Between Us*, which focuses predominantly on her mother’s family and African American background, and the second part, which shifts to her Italian American heritage. In both cases, male characters remain marginal. They are almost non-existent in Miriam’s world, whereas in the Italian American sections of the narration Ragusa’s father is depicted as a traumatized Vietnam veteran and her grandfather Luigi appears aggressive and unassimilated. Both occupy a restricted role in the narrative. In this way *The Skin Between Us* functions as a matrilineal narrative, where women are stronger and more active figures. Ragusa points directly to the idea of a familial history focused on female characters, writing that: “it was the women’s stories that endlessly fascinated me, and in women’s stories men seemed to have little besides walk-on parts” (86).

Miriam emblematizes the assertive and independent black woman, described thus by Barbara Smith: “Heading families, working outside the home, not building lives or expectations dependent on males” (xxvi). The description of Miriam’s environment is characterized by female relatives and ancestors, reflecting the tendency identified by Karla Holloway in African American women writers, who “see themselves surrounded by a tradition of women like them” (619). In narrating her grandmother’s life history, Ragusa refuses to represent Miriam in accordance with stereotypes of black womanhood, in particular in relation to the repeated pattern of miscegenation that marks Ragusa’s maternal family. Evoking her dark-skinned grandfather’s possible rape of Miriam she observes: “How can I write these words and not reinforce the usual stereotypes of dangerous black men and fragile, tragic mulattas? Who might this story hurt? Who might it heal?” (94). Hence she detaches herself from the tendency, which has been noted by Walker, to imagine

pale-skinned African American women as vulnerable victims. Thus Ragusa also reasserts her own sense of self as a mixed-race individual.

In contrast to Miriam, the character of Gilda appears as a self-effaced and passive figure. A sacrificial daughter of immigrants, she is patterned on a recurring character in Italian American fiction, the second-generation woman who is exploited by her family and denied opportunities, embodied by the title character in Michael DeCapite's 1943 novel *Maria* (who, like Gilda, is obliged to marry, still in her teens, an older immigrant she barely knows) or Arturo's mother in John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini!* (1937). Yet Ragusa emphasizes early on the importance played by both her grandmothers in her upbringing, in spite of their differences in outlook and background, as "Miriam and Gilda had been the unwavering magnetic forces of the two poles that had defined my life" (19). By giving so much space to her grandmothers, Ragusa adheres both to Italian American and African American writing traditions. In his book *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (1996) Fred Gardaphé has observed the importance of grandmother characters in the context of Italian American literature, in particular women's writing, where they represent a connection with immigrant roots, thus establishing an idea of continuity with the past. The fiction and autobiographical writings of African American women are also often marked by the prominence of grandmother figures as well as the more general presence of genealogies of women such as, for instance, in Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969), which includes "a succession of American Negro survivors whom [the narrator] implicitly credits with laying the foundations of her own survival" (Fox-Genovese 230). Ragusa adopts a similar strategy in the description of her mother's ancestry, as she traces the history of her maternal family back to a mulatto slave woman.

The quest for female figures is not only circumscribed by Ragusa's own ancestry, but encompasses a wider mythical sphere. Persephone and the Madonna of Mount Carmel, drawn respectively from the classic pagan and the popular Catholic heritage of Ragusa's Southern Italian background, emerge as ideal archetypes of empowered women. Moreover, both are seen as mediators between different worlds or cultures, thus allowing Kym to gain a sense of personal unity. Marianne Hirsh suggests that the myth of Demeter and Persephone can be interpreted as a female alternative to the male-oriented Oedipal story, as

alternate women-centered mythologies—the story of Demeter and Persephone for example—are available to women writers [...] who wish to rewrite the story of mother-child relations from maternal perspectives and, in particular, from the perspective of the mother of daughters. (5)

Hirsh bases her reading on the Homeric "Hymn to Demeter," which does not have a specific location, whereas Ragusa clearly draws her reinterpretation of the Persephone myth from the version in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which specifically takes place in Sicily (the importance of Ovid being evident also from Ragusa's allusions to her own "metamorphoses"). The Sicilian dimension is rendered clear as Miriam introduces her young granddaughter to the narrative of Persephone to allow her access to the "higher" and more acceptable elements of Italian American identity derived from classical culture rather than from working class immigrants. By narrating the myth of Persephone she allows Kym to appropriate the classical aspect of the Sicilian heritage probably inaccessible to the barely literate women of Ragusa's paternal family, who have been denied education and the pleasure of reading. The figure of Persephone, who shifts between two worlds, becomes a central symbolic entity in the narration, enhancing the mythical status of Ragusa's grandmothers and the indirect connection between them, as she reflects:

I understood the irony that it was my African American grandmother who gave me this Greek/Sicilian myth, who encouraged to claim it as my own [...]. A black woman with a high school education and a desperate love of books, she had found a way to put the story of Persephone and Demeter, an ancient story of the troubled ties between mother and daughter, into my hands. She claimed it for all of us. (107)

The image of Persephone runs through the text and appears prominently in its conclusion. The myth is only indirectly hinted at in the opening of *The Skin Between Us* with the mention of the theme of transition between jarring cultures. Within the body of the narrative, Ragusa stages herself as an embodiment of Persephone, who must shift between the African American world of her mother's family and the Italian American one of her father's. In the context of Kym's separation from Miriam, the latter becomes the Demeter figure, as she must forsake the child she has raised. Furthermore, in Ragusa's description of her maternal grandparents' marriage, Miriam herself becomes an image of Persephone, as she is forced to marry the man who probably raped her but, like Persephone, she eventually achieves agency and empowerment. The myth is explicitly narrated at the end of the text. Ragusa mentions that the first place she visits in Sicily is the inland town of Enna, where Hades' abduction of Persephone is said to have occurred, almost paraphrasing Ovid in her evocation of the story. Subsequently, she expresses her preference for Ovid's version, according to which Persephone deliberately eats the pomegranate seeds that will bind her to the kingdom of the underworld. In Ragusa's perspective, Persephone

“choos[es] her own fate” and “is transformed from captive girl to queen of the underworld” (238), becoming an independent rather than a passive female figure as well as a symbol of the possibility of reconciliation between contrasting worlds and cultural spheres. Moreover, because of the Sicilian collocation of this myth, Alison Goeller suggests that Persephone has a particular relevance for Italian American women writing about travels in Italy:

She becomes, then, a particularly appropriate symbol for the Italian American woman who travels in order to reconnect her ancestral heritage, to discover a new identity and to discover what perhaps has been lost in the acculturation of her mothers, grandmothers and great grandmothers, in a way reversing their emigration. Thus the myth can be used as another metaphorical device for analyzing the acculturation of process Italian American women have experienced and also a rite of passage as the daughter makes the necessary break from her culture of birth, represented by Demeter, and back again, forging her own path to becoming her own woman. (76)

According to Hirsh, the Persephone myth expresses a situation of “dual posture” (35), which is reflected by Ragusa’s own predicament as throughout the years of her maturation she shifts between different environments and cultures, having to endure repeated separations from mother figures who correspond to the image of Demeter. The first introduction of Persephone in the fourth chapter of *The Skin Between Us* functions as a turning point in the narration, which in the following chapter shifts from the evocation of Ragusa’s African American background to the discovery of her Italian identity.

The first part of *The Skin Between Us* contains several of the typical motifs of African American literature, including not only double consciousness and racial self-perception, but also, for instance, the recollections of familial genealogy going back to slave ancestors. On the other hand, the sixth chapter introduces the traditional imagery of Italian American immigrant narratives. The descriptions of the ethnic enclave of East Harlem in which Ragusa’s paternal family lived echo the mode of the “ghetto pastoral,” identified by Michael Denning as an insider’s representation of life in working-class immigrant quarters. The representation of Southern Italian popular Catholicism, interrelated with pagan superstitions, plays a significant role. It is here that Ragusa puts particular emphasis on the description of the feast of the Madonna of Mount Carmel, a central figure of Italian immigrant life in New York, placed at the center of Robert Orsi’s study *The Madonna of 115th Street*. Orsi mainly emphasizes the specifically Italian aspects of the festival. Only in a subsequent article does he note the presence of increasing numbers of Hai-

tian immigrants taking part in the festival in more recent years. Orsi indicates that the feast, which has been celebrated since 1881, originally functioned as

[a] central public event and the site for the construction, elaboration, and performance of the various emergent meanings of "Italian American" by the immigrants and their children in the changing circumstances of their American lives. (322)

He also observes that the festival of the Madonna of Carmel reflects the changing social and racial position of Italian Americans. Ragusa traces its more recent evolution, implying that it has acquired a multicultural dimension, attracting not only worshippers of Italian descent but also Catholics with other racial and linguistic backgrounds:

There are hundreds of people all around me, mostly women, Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans, Mexican and Haitians, all moving together like an exhalation of breath. Skins of every color. (143-144)

She does not stress the aspects of devotionalism and women's self-sacrifice appearing in Orsi's book, but rather locates in the festival a notion of female empowerment by emphasizing its gynocentric dimension. Not only does she indicate the predominance of women participants, but she also sees the effigy of the Virgin as an emblem of female strength and authority, denying the image of the *mater dolorosa* and displacing patriarchal forms of monotheism: "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). Ragusa makes an analogy with classic Greek-Roman mythology by likening the Madonna to Aphrodite. Thus she hints at the pagan overtones of popular Catholicism as well as suggesting an indirect connection to Persephone. Like Persephone, the effigy of the Madonna of Mount Carmel is seen as another mythical "queen" merging together different universes. The idea of a similarity between these two mythical female figures is reinforced by the description of Ragusa's Italian American great-grandmother addressing the Madonna of Carmel as "if she were a girl again, telling her own mother what it is that weighs on her heart" (143). Thus the image of the Virgin is reinterpreted in the light of the mother-daughter relationship that dominates the Demeter-Persephone myth.

The third crucial element emerging from *The Skin Between Us* is the influence of Ragusa's main activity as a documentary filmmaker on her prose. Her style is often modulated by cinematic techniques. In reconstructing her family's history, she adopts an approach similar to that of a

documentary, as she reconstructs childhood memories through the description of a series of snapshots, a technique similar to that used by Ragusa in her short film *Passing* (1996), which is composed of a series of photographs accompanied by her grandmother Miriam's narrating voice. Moreover, on one occasion Ragusa describes her own filmmaking processes, connecting them to the different strands of her identity. Thus she describes a filmic experiment concerning her father's involvement with ethnic cuisine, blending cinematic and literary language, since she refers to the unfinished film as "raw footage, never digested into narrative" (225). Describing her own role in the film she implicitly refers to the position she actually takes on through the literary narrative constituted by *The Skin Between Us*:

I am two people in this narrative, the graduate student beginning a documentary about my father that I will never finish and the me of many years later. The me that watches the images on the screen, receiving them from my younger, hopeful self. (225-226)

In some passages of *The Skin Between Us*, Ragusa's identity as a filmmaker is functional to her identity as a writer, since she interprets reality through the images she has filmed and that she analyzes retrospectively in her writing.

All these elements suggest that *The Skin Between Us* blends the traditions and cultures of different ethnic minorities as its protagonist strives to elaborate her identity as a female member of two communities which for different reasons hold a problematic place within the American racial spectrum. For this purpose, she draws from the motifs both of Italian American and African American literature, especially women's writing, investigating issues related to the construction of self and the notion of beauty for women of color. While *The Skin Between Us* does not express direct interest in feminist ideologies, Ragusa implicitly displays a feminist outlook by placing particular importance on ancestral female figures and on matrilineal genealogies which appear in both literary traditions. Moreover, she seeks mythical role models drawn from the classic and Catholic worlds. These models represent the capacity to inhabit harmoniously disparate environments and assert a specifically female form of authority. The experience of the biracial Ragusa emblemizes in a particularly vivid way the development of a woman's identity in a perspective where gender is complicated by a double ethnic allegiance.

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