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SPACE, EMOTION, AND GENDER: MAPPING TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY IN KYM RAGUSA'S *THE SKIN BETWEEN US: A MEMOIR OF RACE, BEAUTY AND BELONGING*[1]

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ABSTRACT. This article examines Kym Ragusa's *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* as a gendered transcultural narrative from the standpoint of spatial theory. In order to do so, it contextualizes the text within the framework of memoir writing and subsequently analyzes the representation of varied emotional spaces in the process of recovering one's identity as displayed by the narrative voice. This research contends that the use of memoir, a genre particularly used by 'marginal' voices, is an adequate means to critically reflect on the (de)construction of identity as well as convey alternative patterns of gender relations and cultural negotiations. In addition, it stresses the central role of space and emotions in reflecting the transculturality and intersectionality of the diasporic and gendered subject.

Keywords: memoir, transculturality, space, emotion, gender.

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ESPACIO, EMOCIÓN Y GÉNERO: TRAZANDO LA IDENTIDAD TRANSCULTURAL EN LA OBRA DE KYM RAGUSA, *THE SKIN BETWEEN US: A MEMOIR OF RACE, BEAUTY AND BELONGING*

RESUMEN. Este artículo explora la obra de Kym Ragusa *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* como una narrativa transcultural de género a través de la teoría espacial. Para ello, se contextualiza el texto en el marco del género *memoir* y, posteriormente, se analiza la representación de distintos espacios emocionales en el proceso de recuperación de la identidad de la voz narrativa. Se analiza cómo el uso del *memoir*, un género particularmente utilizado por voces 'marginales', es un medio particularmente apto para reflexionar críticamente sobre la (de)construcción de las identidades, así como para configurar modelos alternativos en cuanto a las relaciones de género y a los modos de negociación cultural. Además, se destaca el papel central del espacio y de las emociones para reflejar la transculturalidad y la interseccionalidad del sujeto diaspórico y generizado.

Palabras clave: *memoir*, transculturalidad, espacio, emoción, género.

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> il *memoir* contemporaneo poggia su una nozione di soggetto meno individualizzato rispetto a quello dell'autobiograia e, di conseguenza, più radicato nella storia complessa delle comunità di cui lo scrittore fa o ha fatto parte, anche se in modo critico e ambivalente. Ciò vale in particolare per gli scrittori di gruppi marginalizzati, che spesso descrivono le ripercussioni dei loro tentativi di uscire dalle comunità di origine per provare a integrarsi nella classe media americana (eterosessuale, bianca e normativa), e che affrontano i problemi derivanti dal vivere ai margini.[2]
>
> – Giunta, Edvige. "Il memoir come pratica interculturale negli studi italoamericani"

1. MEMOIR, IDENTITY, SPACE

This article examines how contemporary US author Kym Ragusa mixes multiple spatial references to express her transcultural identity and disrupt homogeneous ideas of identity.[3] More precisely, it focuses on the

[2] "Contemporary memoirs rest on the notion of a less individualized subject than that of autobiography and, consequently, more rooted in the complex history of the communities which the writer belongs to or has been a part of, even though in a critical and ambivalent way. This is especially true for writers from marginalized groups, who often describe the consequences of their attempts to get out of their communities of origin to integrate into the American middle class (straight, white, and normative) and who deal with the problems of living at the margin" (my translation).

[3] The so-called "transcultural turn" is a relatively new and influential critical theory to describe social relations and definitions of identity, particularly due to the insights by postcolonial thought and, more recently, the advent of globalization. Approximately since the late-

representation of emotional spaces and their role in the (re)configuration of gendered, cultural and racial diversity: firstly, the paradigmatic contraposition and subversion of national spaces, and secondly the attachment to intimate or imaginary places. This agenda is analyzed through the use of memoir, a genre which opens new possibilities for the self-representation of traditionally marginalized subjects.

Memoir writing is by now an unquestionably widespread genre, which has even replaced established forms of life writing such as autobiography, due to the malleability of its formal boundaries and of subject matter; it is an umbrella term for "stories about unacknowledged aspects of people's lives, sometimes considered scandalous or titillating, and often written by the socially marginal" (Smith and Watson 2001: 3). Its popularity can be specifically retraced to the so-called 'memoir boom', which actually initiated scholarly interest in all forms of life writing (Smith and Watson 2001: xii). As a matter of fact, it seems that the genre has become extremely popular for certain social groups and is a means in which individual stories are a channel to retrieve a larger or collective history. According to Caterina di Romeo, it is a "genere autobiografico 'democratico' che recupera la memoria collettiva di soggetti 'marginali'" (2008: 266).[4] Valentina Seffer also accounts for the rise of the memoir due to its new narrative possibilities for voices who traditionally have had no place in the literary scene: "resenting itself as a democratic form of writing, able to give voice to disenfranchised subjects, it is a genre that lends itself to the articulation of issues of race, gender, class, politics, and religion" (2015: 50).

Edvige Giunta crucially distinguishes memoir from autobiography in that the latter privileges a "singular and personal evolution", that is to say, it concentrates on the process of accentuating an individual voice and differentiating or distancing the subject from the group rather than finding connections with their community or even transforming the relations therein (2017: 154). She affirms that "nel lavoro del memoir è quindi implicita una ri-costruzione dell'io in relazione con la comunità di origine dello scrittore, ma anche la creazione di una nuova comunità che trae la sua forza dall'esplorazione della molteplicità e della varietà delle storie" (155).[5]

twentieth century, a variety of disciplines, including literature, have rejected "the formerly pervasive model of container culture in favour of a more fluid and transient paradigm of relations between societies" (Bond and Rapson 2014: 9). Furthermore, the attention to this phenomenon has become a sort of imperative in that it no longer represents the privileged choices of an elite but "the reality for a significant part of the world's population" (Gilsenan-Nordin, Hansen and Zamorano-Llena 2013: x). See Dagnino (2012) for other related terms (such as transnationalism, cosmopolitanism, etc.) that have emerged in the modern global era and the useful distinction of 'transnationalism' from concepts (e.g. 'intercultural' and 'crosscultural') which derive from the old paradigm of distinct national and cultural identities.

[4] "Democratic autobiographical genre which recovers the collective memory of socially marginal subjects" (my translation).

[5] "Implicit in the work of memoir is therefore a re-construction of the self in relation to the writer's community of origin, but also the creation of a new community that draws its strength from the exploration of the multiplicity and variety of stories" (my translation).

Stephanie Hammerwold has equally emphasized the importance of "connecting with others" in memoir writing, leading to a "transformative potential" of the genre as the recognition of both "similarity and difference" can contribute to community building (2005: n.p.). In other words, self-definition in memoir is as much personal as collective and political, and in the case of women authors, it is argued that they oftentimes write "against the grain of a reality that defines one way to think, act, speak, and write their stories" (n.p). In particular, Ragusa's text has been interpreted as "a critical and creative reconstruction of the past that ties the private sphere, which a memoir may suggest to enlighten, into a broader vision of race and belonging that aims at undoing traditional notions of borders" (Ferraro 2010: 152).

In fact, the memoir offers great room for critical reflection and reinterpretation, together with the tinges made possible by its literary tones, as gathered by the following definition which makes Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson classify it apart from other genres about 'the self':[6] "in contemporary writing, the categorization of memoir often signals autobiographical works characterized by density of language and self-reflexivity about the writing process, yoking the author's standing as a professional writer with the work's status as an aesthetic object" (2001: 4). In addition, this genre characteristically narrows the traditional distance between the author and the critic: "Gli studiosi si sono concentrati principalmente sull'interpretazione di questi lavori [memoirs] mantenendo una distinzione epistemologica e gerarchica tra critico e scrittore. Di fatto, però, ogni scrittore di memoir è a sua volta un critico" (Giunta 2017: 153).[7]

For other critics, the general act of remembering, and writing, one's own life represents a practice that goes "beyond [rescuing] the archive" of the past and is instead fundamentally a cultural process of ongoing or present construction of the self (Brockmeier 2015).[8] In *Transculturing Auto/Biography: Forms of Life Writing*, Rosalía Baena strongly advocates for "our understanding of autobiographical practices as conscious artistic and literary exercises [so] that we fully grasp [...] such a powerful symbolic form and genre of identity construction" (2013: 7). Using Baena's theoretical insights about the contemporary use of autobiographical narratives to allow the negotiation of transculturality, this article precisely entails

[6] Other forms of life-writing are auto/biography, the diary, or the journal.

[7] "Scholars have generally concentrated on interpreting memoirs by resorting to an epistemological and hierarchical distinction between critic and writer. However, every memoir author is a critic at the same time" (my translation).

[8] In this respect, notice how oftentimes the terms 'autobiograhy' and 'memoir' are used interchangeably: e.g. Jens Brockmeier's chapter "Inhabiting a Culture of Memory: The Autobiographical Process as a Form of Life" concentrates on "a Chinese American autobiography, Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir *The Woman Warrior*" (2015: 219). Similarly, Smith and Watson define it as an "autobiographical narrative" (2001: 65), but also quote the full title of Kingston's work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*, as well as initially offer a useful contextualization by clarifying how 'memoir' predated the "relatively recent coinage of the term *autobiography*" as "until the twentieth century the word *memoirs* (the French *les mémoirs*) was commonly used to designate 'self life writing'" (2).

analyzing memoir as a transcultural space. This is an appropriate framework to study how identity is fluid as it changes not only in the course of a person's life but also according to different contexts. As the author under analysis Kym Ragusa pinpoints early in her text: "My skin, dark or light, depending on how's looking" (2006: 19). In her case, the main concern about skin colour reflects her complex cultural identity as a "italoafricanamericana" (De Rogatis 2010: 41) due to a double heritage, African American and Italian American. Her writing perfectly captures the struggle of coming to terms with the past and defining identity through a constant negotiation and reconfiguration of community.

As it is obvious, the phenomena of migration and diaspora disrupt the understanding of belonging and the notion of the homeland becomes complicated as cultural affiliations can be traced back to many different places. In fact, in Ragusa's memoir the female narrative voice does not actually identify herself with either Italy or the USA, as these countries present their own internal complexities in relation to the history of migrations. On the one hand, within the USA, the roots of African heritage due to the legacy of slavery are stressed. Besides, the African American family is mixed and presents different grades of skin colour and racial traits between 'black' and 'white', which is identified as a further sign of inbetweeness and marginality: "with their light skin and straight hair [...], these women were the embodiments of the margins, of the in-between space that I, too, would inhabit" (2006: 67). On the other hand, regarding Italy, internal migrations, which are a common phenomenon in the country, are equally acknowledged.[9] Hence it is equally important how the text seems to concede to the complexity or diversity of the concept of Italy as such, by alluding to the importance of regional differences. In addition, Sicily itself is presented as a cultural crucible of European and African influence: "I have another connection to this part of the world: 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).

However, the acknowledgement of this biracial identity is further complicated as, precisely out of the cultural crucible present in Southern Italy, most immigrants in the USA were not considered white but were often racialized and associated with African Africans. As Francesca de Lucía notes, the narrator's biracial background is "ambiguous" and "unusual", given that "the white part of her heritage is linked to a group whose whiteness was questioned during the early stage of its settlement in

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[9] Italy is not only a country of mass migrations to foreign countries, which are well-known particularly to the United States and South America but also to Europe, Canada, or Australia (see for instance Donna Gabaccia's *Italy's Many Diasporas*), but also presents a characteristic history of internal or "interprovincial migration" (Bonifazi and Heins 2000: 111), mostly to the North generally because of the divide generated by the presence of the powerful industries and government there in comparison to the rural South. For this reason, there is a need "to deconstruct Italian-ness in connection to its long history of internal migrations and emigration" (Parati and Tamburri 2015: 3).

the United States because of a perceived geographical and cultural proximity between Africa and Southern Italy" (2009: 196).[10] Following Teresa Fiore, the narrative is characterized by the allusion to different spaces that are not transparent but rather a "palimpsest of stories", showing their primal importance for the ongoing project of reconstruction of the protagonist's identity. She particularly analyses the centrality of Sicily as a "privileged observatory to rewrite the national biographies of Italy and the United States through their complex transnational formations and relations" (2017: 62).

In short, from the very beginning the narrative voice's sense of identity is firmly linked to space but proves how spatial belonging is nuanced. The book opens with her visit to Sicily, in which she recalls the main features of her life, namely constant movement and the ensuing confusion about belonging: "travelling between their [grandmothers'] homes, trying and not always succeeding to negotiate the distance–cultural, historical linguistic–between them" (Ragusa 2006: 19). The issue of identity is by no means solved as an adult as she wonders "what home was I searching for [...] on my way to Sicily" (19). It becomes more complicated by the end of the memoir when there is no doubt that a given place cannot contain multiple connections and the traces that different cultures leave behind, which she realizes when seeing African and Sicilian boys playing football together: "For a moment I lost track of where I was–was this Palermo, or Cairo, or Lagos, or Harlem?" (237). As said before, Italy's cultural history is far more complex than the image of a unified national identity traditionally linked to a territory that was for most centuries part of different peoples: "per la sua posizione geografica al centro del Mediterraneo, l'Italia

[10] Today, Italians have largely assimilated and, although representing the fifth largest ethnic group in the USA, are to all intents and purposes a white minority. However, recent studies have called attention to the fact that Italians were not (always) that white, but rather "dark white" (Guglielmo J. 2003: 11). This racial category was legally enforced since Italians had "no choice" but to assume such an identity the moment they were asked to sign the papers for becoming citizens (DeSalvo 2003, 27). See also Thomas Guglielmo's *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color, and Power in Chicago, 1890-1945* (2003b) for a detailed history of Italians' racial position, particularly as immigrants in the USA. Furthermore, in "No Color Barrier: Italians, Race, and Power in the United States" he explains how Italians were racialized twice. Firstly as 'dark' in relation to color and, secondly, as Northerners and Southerners in terms of race, which was based on Italy's own 'scientific' differentiations at the time by the likes of Cesare Lombroso, Giuseppe Sergi and Alfredo Niceforo, that is, their "anthropological doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority that saw the light at the end of the nineteenth century" (Mazzucchelli 2015: 5). Yet, even color, which guaranteed that at least (some) Italians were not at the bottom of the US racial spectrum was at times debated; especially for Southern Italians due to geographic proximity and skin tone, associations with 'Negroid' African or Arab blood were not uncommon (Guglielmo 2003a: 34). In addition, their extreme subaltern status was another factor that equally accounted for their racial consideration as 'black.' For instance, they were resented for accepting the worst jobs in the USA or for living close to African Americans (Guglielmo J. 2003: 11). As a case in point, already before migrating, in the words of Booker T. Washington, the Sicilian peasant was regarded as "the man farthest down" and as living in worse conditions than African Americans in the USA (qtd. in Laurino 2015: 30).

(e in particolare la Sicilia) è stata luogo di incontro–e di scontro–tra Europa e Africa, con tutte le conseguenti mescolanze linguitiche e culturali" (di Romeo 2008: 269).[11]

In this sense, Ragusa's text illustrates an important shift in cultural studies. Scholars have noted that the relation of place and identity has moved "beyond 'culture'", that is, the traditional understanding of cultures as placed or bounded (Gupta and Ferguson 1992), which does not mean that space is no longer important or a valid category of analysis. Quite the opposite, critics have turned attention in favor of the practice of *place-making* (Massey 1995; Duncan and Duncan 2004; Storey 2001), which explains the (de)construction and (re)invention of place according to different identity projects, as previously exemplified. Drawing on the Andersonian concept of "imagined communities", Stuart Hall argues that in cases of population dispersal places are still relevant if not more so as they symbolically work "to stabilize cultures" and legitimize the possibility of "unified identities" (1995: 183). In other words, place is a central narrative in the configuration of cultural identity, which accounts for the significance of spatial references in Ragusa's *The Skin between Us* but not exclusively as space is never neutral. More importantly, however, the experience of space is influenced by the intersection of categories such as race and gender, which explains the text's "peculiar blend of geographical and corporeal language" (Ferraro 2010: 157).

2. EMBODIED AND EMOTIONAL SPACES

Following embodiment theory, it is necessary to revise traditional spatial design and practices which tended to cater for a wrongly assumed universal model, the male and white pedestrian, and also account how gendered and racialized subjects use and transit through space (Tonkiss 2005; Carrera Suárez 2015). For example, a classic gender difference is how fear tends to be often spatialized, what has been identified as the geographies of women's fear, particularly in cities (Valentine 1989; Pain 2001). The threat of male violence or sex-related crimes highly condition female (lack of) use of public space as, according to Fran Tonkiss, "their perceptions of danger have a specific geography and this can determine women's routine movements in urban space" (2005: 103).

In turn, "geographies of exclusion" (Sibley 2002) generally affect disempowered social subjects and their transit through space. That is to say, minorities (as well as women) are often perceived as strangers or not belonging to certain spaces, which

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[11] "Due to its geographical position in the middle of the Mediterranean, Italy (and Sicily in particular) has been a place of encounters–and clashes–between Europe and Africa, with all the linguistic and cultural mixes that derive from it" (my translation).

Mind also that Italian Unification or *Risorgimento* took place in 1861 and some scholars' opinion that Italy is a country in geographical more than national terms; it is "an abstraction", in Donna Gabaccia's words (2000: 1), because of the fragmented history of foreign invasions and the so-called 'failed' Unification which exacerbated more than suppressed regional differences between the North and the South.

deters them from the right to mobility or, even worse, confines them to forms of ghetto living. Therefore, regarding class and race, some groups experience spatial exclusion and segregation, which is not a coincidence either as space itself serves to uphold a given social order. As David Sibley notes in his research about the practice of "Mapping the Pure and the Defile", the fear and exclusion of difference has been spatially figured, enacted and reinforced:

> There is a history of imaginary geographies which cast minorities, 'imperfect' people, and a list of others who are seen to pose a threat to the dominant group in society as polluting bodies or folk devils who are then located 'elsewhere'. This 'elsewhere' might be nowhere, as when genocide or the moral transformation of a minority like prostitutes are advocated, or it might be some spatial periphery, like the edge of the world or the edge of the city. (2002: 49)

This distinctive use and experience of space on the part of women and minorities also resonates in *The Skin between Us*. In fact, the first embodied affective response in the memoir occurs when visiting Sicily in the Prologue, in which the encounter with the 'other' is interpreted through normative discourses of gender and race. The episode can be thus interpreted in light of Sara Ahmed's influential study *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), which serves to analyze why and how the all-too familiar and insidious concept of strangeness is associated to specific bodies, namely gendered and racialized bodies. Ahmed claims that "the figure of the 'stranger' is produced, not as that which we fail to recognise, but as that which we have already recognised as 'a stranger' [...] Strangers are not simply those who are not known in this dwelling, but those who are, in their very proximity, *already recognised as not belonging*, as being out of place" (3, 21; italics in original).

In Ragusa's memoir the narrative voice comments on the 'strange' welcome she receives given that she stands apart as an unaccompanied woman in public space as well as for her racial traits:

> Every now and then someone threw a furtive, disapproving glance my way. 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 most of the time. I had that feeling, all too familiar, of wanting to climb out of my skin, to be invisible. (2006: 18-19)

This reception reflects that travel has been a typically male prerogative and accordingly, there are still "traces of the anxiety [generated] in relation to the idea of travelling on one's own" (Seffer 2015: 86). Added to this gender limitation underlying the concept of travel as such, both the gendered and racialized body encounter other borders.

Different layers of interpretation emerge in relation to the body. Firstly, having a female body is not just an oddity, as it is accurately recognized, but also "can be a spatial liability" (Tonkiss 2005: 103). This means that, as women have been

traditionally barred from public spaces, they are easily remarked as strangers therein and often risk being verbally attacked or physically assaulted. According to Susan Collie, some women need to cross-dress when walking in public spaces, since, "[o]n particular streets, this can be a matter of life and death, or at the very least a strategy for avoiding strange stares or verbal abuse" (2013: 4).

Certainly, the narrator endures staring as a typical act of othering, which in this case is also linked to skin color. The episode recalls the objectification described in Franz Fanon's famous *Black Skin, White Masks* and the common difficulty to 'disguise' race or, as Ragusa's narrator herself puts it, "climb out of my skin" (2006: 18-19). As exposed in Fanon's central discussion of "The Fact of Blackness", the "black problem" lies in the very body and the definitions imposed by society (1986: 110). This is the reason the memoir's narrator tries out strategies such as invisibility, accounting for her early consciousness of embodying racial difference, as she reckons when she remembers the subtle ways through which the dominant culture is imposed over others:

> Even at two, three, four years old, race, and its contradictions, were embedded in my most innocent thoughts and desires. Someone had given me a music box […] there was a tiny plastic ballerina on a platform who turned around and around. She wore a white tutu and a gold crown. Her skin was pink and she had bright yellow hair. […] This was what all ballerinas looked like, wasn't it? And if I wanted to be a ballerina, I would have to have the same pink skin, the same yellow hair when I grew up. (Ragusa 2006: 34-35)

The importance of skin color stands not only as a device to denounce the privileges of whiteness (at the expense of the oppression of blackness), but also as a sign of in-betweenness. As the title announces, this is indeed the central element of a text that is structured on yet an additional burden of fixing the 'one and only identity', that of a seemingly dual and mutually exclusive cultural identity: Italian American and African American. For example, the narrative voice evokes her life growing in disparate communities: "Miriam [my paternal grandmother] and Gilda [my maternal grandmother] had been the unwavering magnetic forces of the two poles that had defined my life. Miriam and my African American family, Gilda and my Italian American family. The neighborhoods where they had each lived in Harlem a few avenues away from each other, yet worlds apart" (19).

However, it is at this point that the narrator moves away from the traditional essentialist view in which racial characteristics determine cultural identity: "My skin, dark or light, depending on how's looking" *What are you*? people have asked me for as long as I can remember. In Italy, people ask me, *Di dove sei*? Where are you from?" (19; italics in original). This is one of the many accounts on racial liminality, which is "a form of in-betweenness primarily inscribed in the body, and often a source of vulnerability, but also a conceptual tool that enables to deconstruct, from within, the categories of blackness and whiteness" (Ferraro 2010: 145). Shortly after, when looking at a picture with her two grandmothers, the narrator further questions or destabilizes the supposed transparency of skin color and digs into the complexity

of identity inasmuch as she cannot or is unwilling to choose between her different cultural backgrounds. For this reason, the narrator long ponders on the issue of belonging within one's own family and her feelings between two quarrelling factions, which is a metaphor for dominant impulses to fix definite and unique models of selfhood. This proves inadequate for transcultural subjects in which different cultures coexist and cannot be perceived as separate entities:

> Two warring communities, two angry and suspicious families, two women tugging at my heart, pulling me in different directions.
>
> 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. (25)

On the one hand, anger, suspicion, and violence are associated with the conflicts of a bicultural identity. On the other, the symbols of the map and the border are also used as unequivocal tools attempting to fix and inscribe subjects within established categories and/or limits. On its part, the power of discourse is also shown through the inscriptive metaphor of the blank page, an image for the body waiting to be socially codified and interpreted, "the textualized body [as if] the body is a page or material surface" (Grosz 1994: 177). Yet, the use of these devices can be ambivalent and subverted. To start with, the body is recipient of competing and contradictory social meanings. Furthermore, seeing the body as a blank page or surface that can be passively acted upon to render it "meaningful and functional" does not preclude the very possibility of redefining it for own's own purposes and agency (177). By contrast, the metaphor of the blank page also points to a central right that postcolonial subjects have often lacked and that Fanon detected, that of self-representation or self-definition. This is arguably Ragusa's intent based on the radically different plurality the narrative voice presents immediately afterwards:

> *What are you?*
>
> Black and Italian. African American, Italian American. American.
>
> Other. Biracial, Interracial. Mixed-blood, Half-Breed, High-Yellow, Redbone, Mulatta. Nigger, Dago, Guinea.
>
> *Where are you from?*
>
> …
>
> I DON'T KNOW where I was conceived, but I was made in Harlem. 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. (2006: 25-26; italics in original)

Apart from presenting her transcultural identity, Ragusa problematizes traditional definitions from a spatial point of view, that is, the sense of a rooted identity that is linked to a concrete or fixed place, normally the physical and bounded territory of a region or country. Rather, she embraces contraction and uses alternative notions of belonging such as when identifying with the Greek/Sicilian myth of Persephone: "the good girl destined to live a life split in two. A girl who is always leaving, whose every homecoming is a goodbye" (107). Furthermore, this identification with Persephone has been interpreted as a way to establish a female genealogy (de Rogatis 2010), which is in line with the importance of women in the narrative, not only the grandmothers (Miriam and Gilda) but also the narrative voice's mother (unnamed) and African American great-grandmother and great-great-grandmother (Mae and Momma). The narrative voice recalls the story of Sybela Owens, Momma's grandmother and the family's "first known ancestor" (70). This story is about the destiny of a black woman enslaved and has passed down by each generation of women. Furthermore, the narrator is eager to trace back her female heritage which, as feminist scholarship has long proved (Showalter 1977; Kristeva et al. 1981; Walker 1984; Irigaray 1987), entails an ongoing search for origins, given that women's genealogies are often lost and fragmented:

> There is a Sicilian proverb: *Cu bona reda voli fari, di figghia fimmina avi a cumincinari*. One translation is, 'A good descent starts with a girl'. Descent as heritage, lineage, blood. 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 [...] My heritage, what they have all passed on to me, is the loss, the search, the story". (Ragusa 2006: 237)

This gender lens about women's origins and losses is particularly appropriate to reflect also on the history of migration and displacement, which are linked through the myth of Demeter and Persephone given that their "separation and reunion resonates with the experience of migration and resettlement of women across various generations" (Tomasulo 2021: 83).[12] In contrast to that long female lineage retrieved and celebrated by the narrator, the main man referenced is the father (also unnamed) who abandoned her as a child and reappeared when she was in her teens. Tiziana De Rogatis notes how male figures are seen as a potential menace, or at best, are either strangers or absent from the story. They generally abandon women and children or else hold an "intermittent presence" characterized by some kind of marginality (e.g. alcoholics or drug addicts) (2010: 48-49).

[12] This myth figures actually in several memoirs by Italian American women. Valentina Seffer (2015) shows how Persephone's journey from abduction in the underworld to return emulates women's experiences and their journey of self-discovery to understand or reconcile either their hybrid cultural identity or their gender position within the family.

As it is recognized in the memoir, "My memories of men from that time are less distinct" (Ragusa 2006: 58), whereas the narrator remembers and honors other important female figures of her life such as the dark-skinned woman who looked after her as a baby:

> My earliest memories of the apartment in Harlem are of the sound of women's voices, my mother's and Miriam's the most familiar, sometimes mingled with the gravelly voices of my elderly great-aunts [...] There was another voice, early on. [...] I strain to recognize her; the memory of another woman singing to me [...] She called me baby. And she fed me honey. A line from my childhood I will never forget: *A spoonful of honey each day will keep the doctor away*. [...] Her name is lost to me. [...] But this woman, from another corner of the diaspora, planted a seed in me. She put honey on my tongue, and there, slowly, words grew. (33-34)

She also emphasizes emotional spaces that are less easy to pinpoint and hence unveils equally strong attachments that would otherwise remain hidden. These are spaces with different coordinates as they do not relate to cartography, but to personal experience, the body and the emotions. Thus, as the above quotation shows, Harlem is not simply the undisputed birthplace for one's identity, but a site of *place-making*; it is not a homogenous entity one can simply reclaim or identify in a map, but is engrained into a system of power full of conflicts and divided allegiances. Again, the negative emotions of anger and fear abound in relation to socially marked boundaries, and the body, primarily skin colour, is the main signifier of difference. However, as an alternative to the powerful discourses of fear and violence commonly associated to certain spaces or streets, the positive emotion of desire appears as the transgressive force which defies and may alter systems of discrimination. As a matter of fact, interracial love or desire, which alludes to the relationship between the parents of the narrative voice, is one of the major motifs which justifies the crossing of boundaries in a time when spatial and social segregation were marked across the country:

> He was as exotic to her as she was to him. So they began to see each other. In secret, most of the time. Interracial marriage was still illegal in some states. Even in New York City, neighborhoods, schools, and social scenes were still resolutely segregated. When my parents walked together in Harlem, black men would sometimes threaten my father, and yell at my mother, *"What's the matter, you too good for a black man?"* When they walked together downtown, white men would spit at them; once someone called my mother a dirty gorilla. Women in both parts of town shook their heads at them in disgust. (28)

In other cases, the refusal of passing emerges as another recurring strategy to confront violence or racism. For example, the narrative voice tells how her maternal grandmother Miriam "was emphatic about her family's refusal to pass for white. Passing was both unimaginable exile and deeply shameful" (67). What's more, in the context of the South during the 1950s, Miriam even risks being attacked when entering a "'whites only'" restaurant"; due to her light skin she is asked, "*What side of the tracks are you from*?" (197; italics in original), but still she refuses to pass and

reclaims her 'true' identity by answering back "*Well, you have just served a nigger!*" (198; italics in original). Even when this could probably have been an offence, she decides to reappropriate and celebrate the derogatory term by which black people are called, which becomes an act of courage and defiance in the face of fear and oppression, as the narrative voice explains: "Since Miriam told me her story, I've carried it with me, as a kind of talisman against my own fear, my own silence. Miriam spoke out and claimed the truth of who she was: a black woman in her own mind and heart, and a nigger in the eyes of most white people no matter how light her skin was" (198).

The narrative voice also encounters exclusion and struggles to define herself. In fact, she evokes such a story as she experiences a traumatic event that leaves her paralyzed with fear and helplessness. When at nine she moves to live with her Italian father in the suburbs, a schoolfriend casually tells her one day: "*And my brother showed me how to put razors in apples for niggers*" (197; italics in original). This blatant racist comment, many years after segregation has ended, has a fierce power over subjects, conditioning their behavior and feelings during most of their life. Negative emotions arise again and the question of how to name or define a transcultural identity that is not easily accepted:

> I want to say that this is what I remember, but I know, at least I think I know, that it's my imagination, filling in the space where my memory falters out of fear, confusion, shame. [...] that Halloween afternoon at Shauna's, I was speechless. I was so afraid to call attention to myself, to lose the small sense of security I had found in that white neighborhood, and in my white home. I don't think I would have even known what to name myself on that day, with my yellow skin and my straightened hair pinned under a pretend-blond wig. Or what to call my family, how to name my father's Afro and my Puerto Rican stepmother and my grandfather Luigi's dark skin and "foreign" ways. It was the beginning of many years of silence, of averting my eyes, of receding further and further into myself where there was nothing to explain, nothing to risk. (197-199)

It is telling that the role of memory is particularly limited or affected as a consequence of this painful encounter, as if it was forgotten or hidden. Rather the act of writing, or the imagination, can be seen as a way to speak about trauma. In fact, in an earlier episode just after moving to the new neighborhood in New Jersey, the narrative voice is unsure whether what she remembers about some "kids yelling the word 'nigger'" really happened or was a dream (188). As acknowledged, this confusion reflects her "anxiety of belonging" as well as her being deeply hunted by that insidious word ('nigger') through which she can be 'spotted out' and that seems to reappear as one of her worse nightmares. She is also aware of deliberately fighting against that term, whether or not it has materialized, when she says for example: "I don't remember anyone calling me a nigger, though it must have happened at one point or another, and maybe I've just found a way to forget it" (195). In short, this recurring fear proves how certain bodies clearly stand *out of place* for being different, in terms of race and gender, as I have shown. Moreover, the lingering

preoccupation with the issue of beauty reflects the way in which transcultural belonging deeply intersects with gender liberation.

3. (MIS)PLACING THE BODY: RACE, BEAUTY AND BELONGING

As previously said, Ragusa's memoir unfolds both a personal and collective history, which is particularly expressed through the familial stories and from a female perspective. The narrative voice early admits to the magnetic influence of those two poles represented by her Italian and African American grandmothers. Apart from embodying the relevance of cultural origins, these female figures allow us to remark important conflicts of gender identity, which often intersect with race and ethnicity. In this respect, beauty is one of the most important topics discussed, as stressed in the memoir's subtitle. It is often used to reflect on belonging in terms of race, particularly the fact of expressing confidence and having certain privileges, although occasionally through the benefits of light skin. For example, it is a major concern that defines several women in the family:

> Beauty seemed to be the topic that each conversation between Mae [the narrative voice's great-grandmother] and Miriam circled back toward, no matter what they were originally talking about. *Didn't Miriam look just like a movie star?* Mae would ask me […] *Your great-grandma Mae was some looker when she was young, she drove all the men crazy*, Miriam would echo. *That Alana does have a pretty face*, Mae would say of one of her nieces, *even though she got her father's dark skin*. The stigma of skin of color. […] Mae was a marked woman. Marked by the pigment in her skin, which set her apart, especially from her blond mother and sisters and ultimately from her own light-skinned, red-haired daughter. Mae's difference–her blackness–was relative, of course. She would never know the hardships that her dark-skinned neighbors faced every day. *People mistook her for Spanish or Italian*, Aunt Gladys would tell me proudly. That double-edged pride that I could never understand. (65, 67; italics in original)

According to De Rogatis, these contradictions that puzzle the narrative voice are a reflection of the "internalization of a white canon", which even if mocked and rejected, typically entails the devaluation of blackness (2010: 47). In fact, it is "one of the dominant motifs of African American women's writing, that is, the aspiration to conform to a white aesthetic ideal" (De Lucía 2009: 196). In this respect, Ragusa's memoir bears a noted resemblance with Toni Morrison's well-known novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) in that in both texts the female children long for a white model of beauty transmitted through their dolls, which function as a basic instrument in the reproduction of the dominant culture.

This internalization of racial inferiority is also shown in the efforts (and hurt) made to "tame" the narrative voice's curly hair, a "tug-of-war that's so familiar, played out in every kitchen in Harlem" (Ragusa 2006: 58). The reason why "[her] hair is not 'good'" is, of course, racial difference: "Miriam railed against my father, whose hair is also tightly curled, for ruining mine, for tainting it, those damned Sicilians with their African blood" (56). The distinct curly hair does not come from African

American, as it might be expected, but from her Italian/Sicilian heritage, which is equally problematic given that, as said before, Southern Italians were particularly familiar with color and racial prejudice both in the USA and Italy, being commonly associated with African blood because of geographic proximity and skin tone (Guglielmo 2003b, Mazzucchelli 2015).

Not uncoincidentally, the narrative voice is instructed to transform her physical appearance when she moves to a 'white' neighbourhood in the suburbs of New Jersey: "my mother took me to get my hair straightened for the first time right around the time she told me I was going to live with my father. The adults […] would have an easier time with my hair if it were 'relaxed', that I could even begin to care for it myself" (Ragusa 2006: 191). New Jersey is "one of the destinations of the 'white flight' for upwardly mobile ethnics" such as second-and third-generation Italian Americans (Fiore 2017: 62), who started to melt in US society by overcoming their immigrant hardships and leave the crowded tenements in New York's Little Italies. This explains the reaffirmation of whiteness and the concern with spatial miscegenation. As it is acknowledged in Ragusa's memoir, being accepted in the paternal Italian family entails generally overlooking any trace of blackness: "*You have to understand*, he [my father] began. *My mother* [Gilda] *was from a different world. She couldn't get her head around having a black grandchild, so she just saw you as Italian. Because I was light*, I added. He looked at me a little impatiently. *Yeah, I guess so. But what if I wasn't so light?* I insisted" (152-153; italics in original). In line with the affective expression or reaction in the whole memoir as a result of embodying racial difference, this utter denial creates feelings of rage and unrequited love especially after realizing that coexistence in a family or a neighbourhood does not ensure belonging. She thus critiques Gilda's persisting racial prejudice towards the new neighbours and eventually herself:

> *I hope they're white*, she said. She said the words to me, speaking to me, but not really seeing me. Once again, I said nothing. What was there to say after all these years? Where would I even begin? We sat together in silence, watching the movers, and I raged inside. I raged mostly because I loved her. And because I understood that her love for me could only ever be partial, a love based on an almost acrobatic capacity for contradiction and denial. (223; italics in original)

Hair is perhaps the most important sign of belonging since, unlike skin colour, can be more easily modified to fit in. However, the narrative voice is uneasy with such norms, showing the repeated physical suffering she undergoes, dismissing impositions of identity and searching for new role models. Ultimately, she finds empowerment in music icons more in accordance with herself through which she rejects all established definitions by mainstream society, including ideals of racial appearance as well as female behaviour:

> Poly Styrene […] was biracial like me, with the same springy corkscrew hair and the same in-between skin. She sang about the bewildering aspects of identity, the feeling of freakishness and ugliness that made you want to smash the mirror when you looked into it. But Poly Styrene was no victim. She made it seem cool to be

> an outsider, to not fit in. The next day, I cut off most of my hair, which was growing out from the last time it was straightened. I dyed the unruly virgin roots hot pink and peacock blue. Music became a kind of home for me, especially punk and the glam rock of the early 1970s. It was music made by people who didn't belong anywhere, people who were in between: black and white, male and female. [...] I found a way to feel comfortable in my own skin. To stand out because I wanted to, to highlight my difference instead of trying to fade into the background, gave me a freedom I had never known. For once, I had stopped being the good girl, the one who smiled and apologized and tiptoed on little mouse-feet. For once, for a while, I had found a new tribe, and I felt that I had nothing left to prove. (221)

In fact, another main concern about beauty reveals the oppressive force of gender norms, which generally intersect with race. For example, beauty is defined "like a curse" or as "something monstruous" due to the unwanted attention most women get from men (92). Although the "power of beauty" is certainly celebrated as a way to acknowledge female desire and sexual freedom (77-78), the narrative voice is also conscious that women's beauty may result indeed in their suffering acts of sexual violence, as happened to Miriam when she was raped as a teenager (92). In fact, the feelings of "terror" and "vulnerability" are commonly evoked in similar circumstances such as when the narrative voice, as a child and while she is pointed with a gun, witnesses how her mother is raped in an elevator (81). At times, the narrative voice ends up rejecting beauty inasmuch as being attractive might entail exposing herself to danger and losing any sense of security. Thus emerges a belief about the vulnerable female body in panic and, as said before, this fear not only prevents women from equal access to public spaces but also corresponds to a potential menace. Besides, the female body's vulnerability is not restricted to well-known dangers when occupying public space, given that the intimate or private spaces of the home and the family are often a site of violence or abuse for women:

> After the party, Miriam told me that little girls who act like they're grown get in trouble, that I was a pretty little girl and I couldn't sing and dance like that with men around. "Pretty" sounded like a bad word. What made me pretty, and what could I do to make it go away? All at once, *I became afraid that I wasn't safe anywhere*. Outside there were people Miriam called "sex-fiends" and junkies who would kill you for a dollar if you left the courtyard. And now at home I had to be afraid of men who were Miriam's friends, afraid of dancing, afraid of my own body, that ultimately it would betray me. This lesson would get reinforced again and again–I was somehow too visible. I had to rein myself in, keep my head down. [...] We were learning the language of the black female body, of its joys and desires, and also its vulnerability. (49-50; italics added)

This feeling of vulnerability *anywhere* destabilizes the clear-cut division between private and public spaces, and particularly reflects a preoccupation with traditional definitions of the home, where girls and women are frequently confined, as a safe place, which feminist scholarship has deeply contested. As Linda McDowell argues "different spaces have particular significances and different relations of power that vary over time [...] the home may be simultaneously a place of safety and a trap"

(1999: 31). In addition to this important gender distinction regarding the presumed comfort in familiar spaces such as the home or the family, Ragusa's text illustrates the issue of intersectionality given that racial difference can equally question those traditional sites of belonging. As demonstrated so far, "the embodiment of racial liminality can produce a sense of vulnerability connected with the 'anxiety about belonging' and the associated fear of exclusion (or semi-acceptance) even within one's own family" (Feraro 2010: 161). These negative experiences question the "ideology of the home as haven" (McDowell 1983: 63), an idealization which is considered to perpetuate patriarchy in different ways (Hayden 1980; Watson 1986; Allan and Crow 1989). This notion is also commonly associated with ethnic and marginalized groups who are supposed to find some comfort in domestic environment against the discrimination encountered in society (Sibley 2002). Such an assumption overlooks domestic, intergenerational and gender struggles.

All in all, Ragusa's memoir rejects traditional notions of belonging and proposes instead alternative views of identities and spaces. This is mostly shown in the narrator's distinctive racial awareness, which progressively turns from silence and denial towards dignification and celebration. By the end, she acquires a "new consciousness" (Ferraro 2010: 160) and embraces emotional spaces that allow her to (re)configure her gender and racial identity. For example, after the efforts to become invisible her "retreat into invisibility stops during her adolescence, when she finds a new comfortable home in music" (Ferraro 2010: 160). Racial and transcultural belonging is also crucially facilitated though the affirmation of gender identity given that personal attachment to female figures in the family, particularly the ancestors, make the narrator accept her complex heritage.

In this sense, the memoir is framed by the image of return through the physical journey from Harlem to Palermo that functions as a common form of cultural bridging. More importantly though, the narrator closes with the identification with Persephone, which represents a typical form of "archetypal empowerment" for women (Pratt 1994: 146). Furthermore, she presents a rewriting of the myth of Persephone "choosing her own fate" (Ragusa 2006: 238), unlike most versions in which she is simply a victim of Hades. This reinterpretation is intended as a critical and political expression of the self, as a deliberate act of reaffirmation. In fact, this mythic reelaboration of female identity and destiny resonates with the story of the narrator's ancestor Sybela, whom the narrator believed empowered in her final escape from the plantation with the white owner's son rather than the victim of his kidnapping.

These strategies undoubtedly correspond to feminist and/or cultural identity projects. The feminist rewriting of canonical stories including myths and fairy tales continues to be a common practice ever since the 1970s (Haase 2004; Nelson 2008; Bacchilega 2013; Pelayo Sañudo 2021), whereas the recurrence of the grandmother figure in literature and literary theory serves to recover both female and cultural identity, particularly on the part of minorities including women writers of Italian descent but very notably also by African American authors (Williams 1992; Bona 1992; Ardizzone 2003; Walker 2004). Ragusa's memoir can thus be ascribed to a

sound tradition of writing which critically reflects on the intersectional demands of embodying cultural and gender diversity. The genre of the memoir indeed is particularly adequate to explore new expressions of gender relations and cultural negotiations due to its transformative potential, as already discussed. Added to this, the representation of both emotional spaces and encounters enables a further critical reading in detecting episodes or perceptions of strangeness that derive from asymmetries of power and working towards their alteration.

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