Visualizing the Intersection in Kym Ragusa's *The Skin Between Us*

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In a short personal essay titled "Three Women, Three Photographs" (2008), African Italian American writer and director Kym Ragusa (1966) recounts her relationship to her Black family through visuals, which range from glamorous shots featuring her mother and grandmother to her own reflection in the mirror. As she meditates upon the crucial role that appearances have had in her life, Ragusa recalls owning "a map of the northeastern United States, marked with red circles in the places where [her] various ancestors lived and died." For her, these signs carry multiple meanings: "Red circles overlapping, generations layered into the map, like layers of sediment in rock, my family's history fused into this varied and changed landscape. Red circles overlapping, a map of blood, the bloodlines crossing and meeting in me."[1] Ragusa's cartographical circles retrieve familial bonds at the same time as they evoke the discriminatory practice of redlining. The red marks stand for biological and historical continuities across space, a stratified landscape resulting from multicultural interactions; yet these marks also isolate geographical areas whose inhabitants have been denied access to primary services. In a move characteristic of much of Ragusa's artistic and literary production on the challenges of intercultural dialogue, the connections that unite can also divide. By crystallizing her family's repeated dislocation and resettlement, the marked map makes it possible for Ragusa to embrace a mode of self-portraiture that privileges group histories and structural patterns over singular instances. Acting as a foil to the mirror that features in the text's opening, this codified spatial representation does not rely on the reproduction of somatic traits, but rather excavates the historical depths that underpin the representational surface. In so doing, the writer fashions herself as the product of multiple genealogical lines, rooted in distinct geographical positions and cultural traditions. The essay's conclusion juxtaposes the two different mediums, translating Ragusa's awareness of the multidimensional nature of the cartographical image to her own reflection: "I face the mirror. And what I see is a map. My skin, my eyes, my hair…are the traces of all the people, the women and the men, who took a chance, who left all they knew to begin again, the people who came together to make me."[2] Through the comparison with the map, Ragusa casts her image as an archive, a repository of traces that speak to centuries-long transnational flows, and as a result foregrounds the embeddedness of space, historical time, and identity.

Ragusa's pairing of personal histories and collective geographies resonates with a widespread tendency that emerged in the second half of the twentieth century to account for interpersonal relations and social mechanisms through spatial metaphors. Maps, positions, and borders are only a few of the many geographical terms that have migrated into theoretical and literary texts to explain society's inner workings. In the late 1980s, urban theorist Edward Soja presented this renewed interest in location as the evidence of the epistemological "reassertion of space" in social discourse, after decades in which historical considerations dominated social analyses.[3] In the same

[1] Kym Ragusa, "Three Women, Three Photographs," in *About Face: Women Write about What They See When They Look in the Mirror*, ed. Anne Burt and Christina Baker Kline (Berkeley: Seal, 2008), 56–57.
[2] Ibid., 61.
[3] Edward W. Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London: Verso, 1989).

years, feminist and postcolonial movements contributed to shifting critical attention away from generalizing temporal frameworks by interpreting embodied and geographical space as a marker of difference within, and among, groups previously conceived of as homogeneous. Such an approach to diversity was instrumental in countering essentialist notions of personal and collective identities.[4] In activist circles, first-person accounts became the very site from which to embark upon critical analyses of society and come to terms with one's own situatedness. Several personal essays, memoirs, and autoethnographies of the period feature detailed descriptions of their author's standpoint, as they retrace its social genesis and explore how it is embedded in power relations that determine its purview.[5] In the context of this shared attentiveness to positionality, the metaphor of the "intersection" took on prominence to capture the in-between life of individuals who identify with multiple groups. A symbol of multicultural encounters, this image became a conceptual tool for thinking about the subject's position within different social mechanisms and for interrogating the relationship between the visible and the invisible in public discourse. In particular, two theorists brought into focus the complex nature of this spatial paradigm, which occurs in Ragusa's essay in the form of the "overlap" and the "crossing." Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) and African American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1959) each deployed the image of the crossroads within their critical projects to think about the interactions between individuals and social structures. Both contributed in their own way to transforming this powerful metaphor into a staple of the contemporary social imaginary.[6]

For Anzaldúa, the intersection is first and foremost synonymous with identity plurality. The titles of her autobiographical works often point to physical and metaphorical zones of contact between cultures. "La Prieta" (1981) refers to the nickname Anzaldúa's grandmother gave her because of her dark skin color, which made her stand out against the whiteness of her relatives, while *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) juxtaposes English and Spanish as the two main linguistic and cultural traditions within which the writer situates herself. Similarly to Ragusa's "crossing," Anzaldúa's notion of "mestizaje," hybridity, roots diversity at once in blood relations and the violent histories of settler colonialism; yet it also develops into a capacious identity paradigm that, overcoming binary logics, defies cultural and gender stereotypes. Besides thinking of herself as "a

[4] On these questions see, for example, Kathleen M. Kirby, "Thinking through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects, and Space," *boundary 2* 20, no. 2 (1993): 173–89; Neil Smith and Cindi Katz, "Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics," in *Place and the Politics of Identity*, ed. Michael Keith and Steve Pile (London: Routledge, 1993), 66–81; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); and Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[5] For a definition of each of these genres, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

[6] Over the past four decades, the "intersection" has gained status as one of those "images, stories, and legends" that for Charles Taylor define the "social imaginary," that is, "the ways people imagine their social existence" and "how they fit together with others." See *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 23. "Intersectionality"—the critical framework that builds upon this spatial metaphor—is rooted in a long tradition of U.S. Black feminist thought and women-of-color organizing. On its history, see Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016); Jennifer C. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019); and Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019). This concept has recently transcended U.S. borders to become a major player in European debates. On its uptake, for example, in the Italian and French contexts, see Nicoletta Marini-Maio, Paola Bonifazio, and Ellen Nerenberg, eds., "Intersectionality in Italian Histories, Cultural Products, and Social Practices," special issue, *g/s/i*, no. 8 (2021); Caterina Romeo and Giulia Fabbri, eds., "Intersectional Italy," special issue, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 58, no. 5 (2022); and Éléonore Lépinard and Sarah Mazouz, *Pour l'intersectionnalité* (Paris: Anamosa, 2021).

crossroads inhabited by whirlwinds," Anzaldúa adopts other images of multiplicity in her self-portrait: she presents herself as "a wind-swayed bridge," a multilingual, mixed-race individual who learned how to "walk the tightrope" between different social and cultural environments "with ease and grace."[7] The writer's ambivalence towards her state of in-betweenness emerges in her self-representation: the bridge that facilitates communication and mobility between previously separated areas contrasts not only with the border as the site for police-enforced limitations on migratory flows, but also with the cross-cultural tensions and exclusionary dynamics alluded to in the act of juggling. Anzaldúa's "autohistoria-teoría" has had a lasting impact on transnational feminist literature, as becomes apparent in the works of Somali Italian writer Igiaba Scego (1974).[8] In her autobiographical narratives, which share a similar emphasis on geo-ethnography to Ragusa's texts, Scego accounts for her family's forced relocation from Africa to Europe. *La mia casa è dove sono* ("My Home Is Where I Am," 2010) draws a multidimensional map of the two cities where Scego has lived, Rome and Mogadishu, reconstructing the ties that link her to both cultures. Scego thus claims for herself multiple affiliations, in keeping with Anzaldúa's belief that "to survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras* / be a crossroads."[9] Questioning any nationalistic discourse that leaves out intercultural exchange, Scego redefines notions of belonging: "Sono italiana, ma anche no. Sono somala, ma anche no. / Un crocevia. Uno svincolo" ("I'm Italian, but also not. I'm Somali, but also not. / A crossroads. An interchange").[10] Along with other self-definitions—"un ponte, un'equilibrista, una che è sempre in bilico e non lo è mai" ("a bridge, a tightrope walker, someone who always hangs in the balance and yet never achieves it")—the "crocevia" serves here, as in Anzaldúa, to convey an ethics of complexity.[11]

Whereas Anzaldúa theorizes the borderlands as a privileged site for understanding personal identity, Crenshaw uses the image of the crossroads to cast light on compounded forms of discrimination. In the first article where she elaborates on this new theoretical framework, titled "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" (1989), Crenshaw demonstrates the invisibility of Black women in the eyes of the legal system.[12] In her analysis, U.S. antidiscrimination laws fail to recognize the specific circumstances that affect several African American women because they subsume their lived experiences under those of other "women" and "Blacks," without questioning the scope of these social constructs. By way of example, Crenshaw gives the fictional case of a car accident at a crossroads. The victim of the accident is a

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[7] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherríe L. Moraga and Gloria E. Anzaldúa, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), 205, 209.

[8] For a discussion of the genre of "autohistoria-teoría," which Anzaldúa defines as "a personal essay that theorizes," see Gloria E. Anzaldúa, "now let us shift…the path of conocimiento…inner work, public acts," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 557, 578. Scego repeatedly states her admiration for Anzaldúa; see, for instance, her autobiographical note to "Identità," in *Amori bicolori: Racconti*, ed. Flavia Capitani and Emanuele Coen (Rome: Laterza, 2008), 4. On Scego's relationship to Anzaldúa, in particular as it pertains to her 2008 novel *Oltre Babilonia*, see Simone Brioni, *The Somali Within: Language, Race and Belonging in "Minor" Italian Literature* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2015), 129–37.

[9] Gloria E. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 195.

[10] Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*, 2nd ed. (Turin: Loescher, 2012), 159. Translations are my own unless otherwise noted. The image of the "svincolo" adds a note of peripheral marginality to that of the "crocevia," given that it usually refers to junctions in the highway system that make it possible to avoid crossing traffic streams going in the opposite direction.

[11] Scego, *La mia casa*, 34.

[12] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989): 139–67.

Black woman; the traffic in which she is caught, coming and going in different directions, stands for various discriminatory discourses and practices. The outcome of the accident is clear, but its dynamics are not. Multiple factors contributed simultaneously to the event and no single driver takes responsibility for it. Central to Crenshaw's analysis is the fact that the Black woman herself is *not* the intersection, as in Anzaldúa's and Scego's self-portraits, but rather finds herself situated *in* the intersection. Crenshaw's interest lies in the social structures that position the Black woman at that confluence, rather than in her identity. This is why in her anecdote the streets that converge at the crossroads do not constitute predetermined essences; instead, they are social categories, instruments of power through which society sees and directs individuals. Foregrounding the "structural convergence" of issues of gender and race, Crenshaw's intersection makes it then possible to visualize and challenge the social processes that shape the experience of marginal subjects.[13]

If Anzaldúa embraces the crossroads as a metaphor for cultural hybridity, Crenshaw draws on spatial concepts to emphasize the risk of political inexistence of disadvantaged groups. As "Three Women, Three Photographs" shows, these two approaches are far from being incompatible and can be productively combined: Ragusa suggests that the map's overlapping lines are the result of processes of amalgamation paired with discrimination.[14] Compared to her predecessors, Ragusa pays greater attention to the historical dimension inherent in the image of the street junction. She turns to geographical metaphors not only to imagine plural identities and to think through the structural causes of inequality, but also to uncover their historical roots. If the street junction is linked to a spatial conception of identity as position, this location is not absolute but rather relational and historically situated. In this article, I discuss how the intersectional imaginary unfolds in the memoir *The Skin Between Us* (2006), where Ragusa elaborates on the stratigraphic model that defines her understanding of personal and collective identities. At its core lie not only the difficult relationships between the two branches of Ragusa's family, which are rooted in distinctly felt socio-economic and cultural differences, but also complex intragroup dynamics. Her two communities are represented as so internally fractured that it is unclear to whom the title's first-person plural pronoun refers. Ragusa's "us" does not stand for a united entity, nor is it expressed in stark opposition to a crystallized "them." Rather, the groups that coalesce around the narrator—an "us" that marks an object, not a subject, position—share the same conflicted relationship to the "skin" that simultaneously unites and separates their members. Situated in-between groups, the writer is the first to suffer the effects of these divisions, though all her relatives partake in the same crisis of referent. In this regard, the relative prestige that Ragusa's maternal grandmother, Miriam, holds within the African American community as a fair-skinned, red-haired woman is significant. Like her aunts, Miriam belongs to a minority of African Americans who are able to pass for white; such a positionality makes her look down on both darker members of her group and Kym's Southern Italian relatives, whom she blames for her granddaughter's "African

[13] Kathleen Guidroz and Michele Tracy Berger, "A Conversation with Founding Scholars of Intersectionality: Kimberlé Crenshaw, Nira Yuval-Davis, and Michelle Fine," in *The Intersectional Approach: Transforming the Academy through Race, Class, and Gender*, ed. Michele Tracy Berger and Kathleen Guidroz (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 65.

[14] For another example of how these two models have been read together, see Patrick R. Grzanka, *Intersectionality: A Foundations and Frontiers Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 106–07: "Anzaldúa's work exemplifies the concept of intersectionality perhaps better than the traffic intersection metaphor so central to the field and to Crenshaw's initial articulation of the concept, because Anzaldúa denies any logic that presumes there were ever discreet dimensions of difference that collided at some particular point: in the borderlands, mixing, hybridity, unfinished synthesis, and unpredictable amalgamation were always already happening, and are forever ongoing."

blood" and hair texture.[15] For their part, the Ragusas' refusal of their son's union with an African American woman, and their subsequent denial of Kym's mixed origins, can be seen as an effort to distinguish themselves from a racial group with which they were often associated because of economic conditions and geographical proximity. Their overt anti-Blackness speaks to nationwide tensions about the status of the Italian American community that date back at least to the early twentieth century, when Italian immigrants, considered legally white, were often racialized on the basis of their low social class through labels such as "dark complexion."[16] Given her hybrid background, Ragusa has a thorough understanding of mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion. Her work strives to cast light on the precarious positions of marginal subjects, accounting for their invisibility in both its spatial and temporal entanglements. I argue that, in foregrounding the articulation of geography and history, Ragusa's spatial poetics opens up onto a theory of "implication," whereby subjects are constantly folded into structures from the past and are called to act upon them in the present.[17]

Scenes of Interpellation

The Skin Between Us opens onto a liminal space. In the memoir's prologue, Kym stands on the deck of a ferry crossing the Messina Strait, her eyes intent on tracing the ship's wake. Heading to Sicily to film a documentary on the figure of Persephone, she feels dizzy because of the attentiveness with which she has been staring at the sea whirling below her and the resounding noise of the ship's engine. As her sensory perceptions fade, Kym finds herself thinking about the sea voyages her ancestors undertook long ago. Within the framework of her family, the ship represents not only the hopes of better living conditions that her Italian relatives harbored as they embarked upon their transnational journeys, but also the Atlantic slave trade and its embedded structures of inequality, which would long plague American society. Sicily is the island of Ragusa's paternal relatives as much as "the crossroads between Europe and Africa, the continent from which [her] maternal ancestors were stolen and brought to slavery in Maryland, West Virginia, and North Carolina"; her family's history entails "two sets of migrations, one forced, one barely voluntary. Two homelands left far behind. Two bloodlines meeting in [her]."[18] Ragusa draws attention here to the mechanisms of marginalization that both sides of her family endured as a result of physical relocation. Despite the marked differences that distinguish her experience from that of the African and Italian relatives whose footsteps she retraces, such marginalizing processes still have significant effects on her everyday life.[19] Alone on a ferry shuttling between

[15] Kym Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging* (New York: Norton, 2006), 56. On the representation of the "South" in this text, see Annarita Taronna, "Shaping Transcultural Ethnographies of Southernness: *The Skin Between Us. A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* by Kym Ragusa," *Scritture migranti*, no. 5 (2011): 105–25. As much as possible, I distinguish between Ragusa as the author of the memoir and Kym as its protagonist.

[16] See Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, eds., *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (New York: Routledge, 2003), in particular chapters 1 and 2: Louise De Salvo's "Color: White/Complexion: Dark," 17–28, and Thomas A. Guglielmo's "'No Color Barrier': Italians, Race, and Power in the United States," 29–43.

[17] I borrow the notion of "implication" from Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

[18] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 18.

[19] Teresa Fiore has analyzed the key role that this opening sequence plays in Ragusa's memoir in *Pre-Occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), where she observes how in some cases "the transportation of emigration 'happened on the same ships that were used for the slave traffic'" (58). Building upon Fiore's insight, I suggest that, in the narrative's symbolic economy,

two regions of a country that she cannot call home, Ragusa materializes her sense of unbelonging in an imaginary scene of interpellation. The writer reflects on her hybrid identity in response to both real and internalized social pressures, much like other autobiographers living across cultures.[20] In "La Prieta," Anzaldúa undertakes a self-reflexive exercise to respond to the question "What am I?," demonstrating how externally imposed labels can "chop" the subject "up into little fragments," "tag[ging] each piece," rather than illuminate its multifaceted nature.[21] For her part, in *La mia casa*, Scego contrasts the identity paradigms underlying the questions "Sono cosa? Sono chi?" ("What am I? Who am I?"), as she rejects objectifying racial categories and uses storytelling to come to terms with her dual sense of belonging.[22] Compared to these two texts, Ragusa's opening scene explicitly foregrounds the intersubjective dimension of her act of self-definition. A few "furtive, disapproving glance[s]" in her direction call to mind previous interrogations and awaken powerful cultural memories. It is because she is faced once again with pressing requests aimed at clarifying her origins that she feels compelled to open up to social introspection:

> 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. My skin, dark or light, depending on who'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?[23]

Abroad, as well as at home, Kym tries to deflect attention away from her body by "pull[ing]" her hair "back" and behaving in a way that minimizes conflict, so as to mediate the expectations of different cultural groups. Her attempt at passing on the ferry causes her to desire "to climb out of [her] skin," whereby a porous membrane becomes a barrier that needs to be painstakingly overcome. Ragusa is "hypervisible" because she inhabits a social space where, according to Sarah

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the disorientation Ragusa experiences on the ferry testifies to the haunting legacies of slavery and forced mobility. For the importance of the metaphors of the "sea" and the "ship" to Black studies, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), and Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). I will discuss the theoretical implications of Fiore's notion of "pre-occupied space" in the last section of this article.

[20] I prefer to use the expression "scene of interpellation" to describe this recurrent narrative situation, rather than Chiara Mengozzi's "interlocutory scene," because of its reference to Louis Althusser's seminal work on processes of subjectivation. Mengozzi discusses the impact of the law on autobiographical self-representations by Francophone and Italophone migrants in "Scena interlocutoria e paradigma giudiziario nelle scritture italiane della migrazione," *Between* 2, no. 3 (2012), https://ojs.unica.it/index.php/between/article/view/376. For a broader contextualization, see also her *Narrazioni contese: Vent'anni di scritture italiane della migrazione* (Rome: Carocci, 2013).

[21] Anzaldúa, "La Prieta," 205.

[22] Scego, *La mia casa*, 33. The implicit opposition between "whatness" and "whoness" that Scego draws here and further develops in the last chapter of the book, where she cites Karen Blixen's "The Cardinal's First Tale" (159–60), brings to mind Adriana Cavarero's reflections on narrative identity and their discussion in Graziella Parati's work on transnational Italian literature and film. See Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1997), and "*Who* Engenders Politics?," in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*, ed. Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002), 88–103. See also Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), especially chapter 3.

[23] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 18–19.

Ahmed and Caterina Romeo, "whiteness is lived as a background to experience."[24] As a "chromatic norm," such whiteness is enforced through the constant, iterative presence of bodies that each conform to a certain ideal, rather than through verbalization, since making its existence explicit using words would entail diminishing its ideological significance as a given.[25] In the ferry episode, it is precisely the fictionalized transparency of the social space, along with the enduring memory of her ancestors, that creates the presuppositions for the imaginary scene of interpellation. Predicated on processes of marginalization rather than on social recognition, Ragusa's hypervisibility positions her as the addressee of two distinct questions: "What are you?" and "Di dove sei?" The figures who question her are nationally and linguistically identified, even though they remain unnamed in their attempt to police racial boundaries because they embody social structures. Whereas Americans usually inquire after the social fabric that makes up her identity, in search of clear-cut categories that condense historical legacies into one-word descriptors, Italians posit from the very beginning her status as a foreigner. Her dark complexion is enough to qualify her as a member of an exoticized elsewhere, incompatible with their idealized notions of Italian community. In the American context, the "what" points to the complex histories of mixed-race unions, which range from the sexual violence to which enslaved women were subjected on plantations and the one-drop rule used to classify pseudo-scientifically different "races" to the anti-miscegenation laws in effect in some states until a year after Ragusa was born, when the Loving v. Virginia Supreme Court ruling made banning interracial marriage illegal.[26] By suggesting that her skin, depending on the observer, may be not only too "dark" but also too "light," Ragusa further highlights how "demand[s] for disclosure and allegiance" come from both within and outside each of her communities.[27] In contrast to the "what," the "di dove" disavows any historical and affective attachments to transnational mobility that may define Italians' recent past as migrants and colonizers. The fictional representation of Italy as a chromatically homogeneous nation is upheld even in an area of intense movement such as Sicily, which has historically been both a crossroads of cultures and a major point of departure for national and international migratory flows.[28]

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[24] Sarah Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 150. Caterina Romeo engages with Ahmed's understanding of whiteness, and Nirmal Puwar's notion of the "somatic norm," in "Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 221–36, where she develops her theory of the "chromatic norm." Romeo compares *The Skin Between Us* and *La mia casa è dove sono* in a later article on this topic, which takes its point of departure from the scenes of (self-)interpellation I mentioned before: "Defying the Chromatic Norm: Strategies of Invisibility and Italian Transdiasporic Blackness," in *Contemporary Italian Diversity in Critical and Fictional Narratives*, ed. Marie Orton, Graziella Parati, and Ron Kubati (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2021), 147–57. On this comparison, which Romeo further contextualizes in *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations in Italian Postcolonial Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), see also Cinzia Marongiu, "Cartografie di appartenenza: Igiaba Scego e Kym Ragusa l'affermazione di identità plurali," *Italica* 99, no. 1 (2022): 106–18.

[25] Romeo, "Racial Evaporations," 224.

[26] For a discussion of these issues in American life-writing, see Caroline Streeter, "Mixed-Race Autobiographical Narratives," in *A History of African American Autobiography*, ed. Joycelyn Moody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 272–91, and Nicole Stamant, *Memoirs of Race, Color, and Belonging* (New York: Routledge, 2022). While Streeter briefly mentions *The Skin Between Us* (283), Stamant does not include Ragusa's text in her corpus.

[27] This is how Ragusa interprets the "What are you?" question in her foreword to *Olive Grrrls: Italian North American Women and the Search for Identity*, ed. Lachrista Greco (Madison, WI: Olive Grrrls Press, 2013).

[28] It is worth noting that the ferry scene is filtered through Kym's point of view and that it does not feature other voices. Ragusa conjures up the two questions because of the unease she experiences on the ferry, yet the other passengers do not engage verbally with her. Moreover, she is the one who makes assumptions about her co-travelers—

The question "Where are you from?" appears frequently in African diaspora literature as a marker of essentialist approaches to identity that lead to processes of individual and collective objectification. Grounded in slippery associations between skin color, race, and geography, this question relies on visual perceptions of diversity that are taken to correspond to specific spatial locations and biological categories. Two examples come to mind: in the dialogue between James Baldwin and a Jamaican janitor at the British Museum in London, as well as in the daily encounters of one of the Afro-German women interviewed by Grada Kilomba, Blackness denotes Africanness, regardless of an individual's lived experiences.[29] In spite of the two different cultural contexts to which Ragusa refers in the memoir's opening pages, the opposition between "what" and "di dove" has then to be nuanced. This is particularly the case for mixed-race subjects. Given that physical features and geographical space are not synonymous, verbal interrogations constitute a main strategy to restore the social order that racial ambiguity threatens. Ragusa addresses these issues already in her early work as documentary filmmaker: *Demarcations* (1992) starts off with a question about the protagonist's exoticized mixed origins, "us[ing] the female body as a landscape to explore memories of a rape," whereas *Passing* (1996) investigates entanglements of social identity and geography in the Jim Crow South.[30] At the end of the memoir Ragusa incorporates the key events that unfold in this last short film, in a scene of interpellation that recalls her own experience on the ferry. Ragusa relates a trip that her maternal grandmother Miriam took in the late 1950s. At a diner in North Carolina, where Miriam and her companion had stopped to have lunch on their way to Miami, two white men confront her about her origins, compelling her to self-identify in spatial terms:

> As soon as she stepped inside the restaurant, she saw that there were only white people there, a waitress and two men sitting at the counter. Somehow, it hadn't occurred to her that perhaps this was a segregated place….She noticed the men

for example, she writes that "they must all be Sicilians" (18)—without having any evidence supporting her claim. Indeed, throughout the autobiographical narrative, memory and imagination play an important role in Ragusa's construction of "others," who are rarely given the opportunity to express themselves in the first person. On the lack of dialogue in this text, which she motivates in terms of genre, see Ragusa's response to Farai Chideya in "The Art of the Memoir," NPR, August 20, 2007, https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=13751601?storyId=13751601&t=1600761207212.

[29] In the first case, such an association is understood as a sign of "fraternity"; in the second, it stands for the embodied evidence of the subject's foreignness to the national community. See James Baldwin and Margaret Mead, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 81: "A black Jamaican…asked me where I was from, and I said I was born in New York. He said, 'Yes, but where are you from?' I did not know what he meant. 'Where did you come from before that?' he explained. I said, 'My mother was born in Maryland.' 'Where was your father born?' he asked. 'My father was born in New Orleans.' He said, 'Yes, but where are you from?' Then I began to get it; very dimly, because now I was lost. And he said, 'Where are you from in Africa?' I said, 'Well, I don't know,' and he was furious with me"; Grada Kilomba, *Plantation Memories: Episodes of Everyday Racism*, 2nd ed. (Münster: Unrast, 2010), 64: "'They see you and the first thing that crosses their mind is to check: 'Where is she from?' They just walk in your direction and ask, without even knowing you.…' These are the words of Alicia, an Afro-German woman. From very early on, *white* people living around her have confronted her with questions concerning her body and her national origins, reminding her that she cannot be 'German' because she is Black."

[30] The in-text quote comes from the website of the film's producer and distributor: Third World Newsreel, "Demarcations," https://www.twn.org/catalog/pages/responsive/cpage.aspx?rec=918&card=price. Ragusa gives voice to *Demarcations*' unnamed aggressor through white, capitalized words on static black panels, which abruptly interrupt the sequence of moving images. The aggressor's comments other the woman's body and personal story: "Where are you from?"; "You're very interesting looking"; "You must have Indian blood"; "I can see the oriental in your eyes"; "You don't really look Black."

> looking her up and down, nudging each other. *What side of the tracks are you from?* one of them asked her. She thought they meant where was she from, so she told them New York. The other man asked her the same question, only this time more slowly, as if she didn't understand English.[31]

The two men look intently at Miriam but cannot racially classify her on the basis of their stereotypical ideas about whiteness and Blackness. In the segregated mid-twentieth-century South, urban space is so chromatically and culturally divided that Miriam's interlocutors can effortlessly recast the white-Black binary spatially when they ask her to state her race. Their question recalls how train tracks often separated economically disadvantaged areas from prosperous sectors of American cities, drawing a metaphorical color line against which to measure all individuals.[32] In contrast to the image of the intersection, or that of the railroad switch, the men's tracks never cross, for they conform to the ideal of the one-drop rule, whereby any individual with at least one Black ancestor is to be considered "Black" regardless of her skin color. The relationship between the "what" and the "where" established and intensified by the men's repetition of the question demonstrates how "the lived experience of race takes place in actual spaces, while the lived experience of place draws its determinate logic from overt and covert understandings of race."[33] Subjects are made in, and through, space. The ending to Miriam's story functions as a foil to the opening scene. Both women are crossing unfamiliar environments, which reposition them racially. However, if Kym avoids direct confrontation, Miriam refuses to pass for white, claiming her place in the African American community in a period when this could have cost her life. Because of Kym's in-betweenness, formulating identity claims is more complicated for her than for her grandmother, who, in spite of all difficulties, never questioned her personal racial and social affiliation. Over time, it is through writing that Ragusa honors Miriam's legacy, imitating her defiant gesture by "talking back" to the ferry's interlocutors. *The Skin Between Us* constitutes the writer's belated answer, as it is in this text that Ragusa establishes her own terms to define her identity.[34]

Geographies of Sameness and Difference

Set in-between regions, the prologue foregrounds how space co-constructs social identities. Ragusa explains that her grandmothers, Miriam and Gilda, represented the "unwavering magnetic forces of the two poles that had defined [her] life," the two cultural and geographical locations between which she constantly had to mediate.[35] By the time of her trip to Italy, her grandmothers

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[31] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 197–98.

[32] Caterina Romeo elaborates on the significance of this passage, citing the clarifications Ragusa provided in an email exchange, in "Una capacità quasi acrobatica," in Kym Ragusa, *La pelle che ci separa*, trans. Clara Antonucci and Caterina Romeo (Rome: Nutrimenti, 2008), 259.

[33] George Lipsitz, *How Racism Takes Place* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011), 6.

[34] On memoir as an act of resistance and critical reappropriation of the past, see Edvige Giunta, *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), especially chapter 6, and Caterina Romeo, *Narrative tra due sponde: Memoir di italiane d'America* (Rome: Carocci, 2005), with whom Ragusa was in dialogue as she was writing her text. Ragusa acknowledges the vital role that Italian American creative and scholarly circles had in the composition of *The Skin Between Us* on several occasions. See, for example, the foreword to *Olive Grrrls*, Kindle, and "On Vulnerability and Risk: Learning to Write and Teach Memoir as a Student of Louise DeSalvo," in *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Work of Louise DeSalvo*, ed. Nancy Caronia and Edvige Giunta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 106.

[35] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 19.

had both passed away; in fact, Ragusa embarked on this journey hoping it would help her to cope with feelings of desolation and figurative homelessness. The first chapter opens with a meticulous description of the only photograph that features the three women together, as they sit around the dining room table after sharing a Thanksgiving meal. Among the dozens of pictures that Ragusa details, often with the help of her imagination, the "unstaged" portrait of the family dinner is the only image that is reproduced in the memoir, facing the title page. The writer's careful analysis of the photograph aims to highlight the arbitrariness of racial classifications. Despite the women's distinct "variations on ivory, yellow, [and] olive," Ragusa contends that their skin has "almost the same color."[36] In a passage rich with repetitions and oxymorons, in which key assumptions about the relationship between sameness and difference are called into question, Ragusa suggests that the skin played the role of "a border, a map, a blank page" in her family history.[37] The first term indicates an area that hinders intersubjective exchanges, while the second refers to an object that codifies surfaces and thus enables a translation of meanings, providing access to networks of relative positions and shared language to talk about them. The third, final item on the list exposes the tension between the first two. The skin in itself is neither an obstacle nor an interpretative tool; rather, it is a porous surface that makes it possible for observers to project their own racial fantasies on it. Similarly to Stuart Hall's notion of "race," which the theorist understands as "a floating signifier," a cultural construction that has no stable referent, Ragusa's skin is a "mirror"—as much as a "membrane" and a "veil"—where the observers' own desires and fears can come into focus.[38]

After destabilizing received ideas about race and skin color with her close reading of the family portrait, Ragusa returns to the two queries from the prologue. As she engages on her own terms with these two types of interpellation, Ragusa dismisses the "what" question with a series of epithets, which range from ethnic descriptors that appear on census forms to racial slurs that others attach to her family's composite makeup: "Black and Italian. African American, Italian American. American. / Other. Biracial, Interracial. Mixed-blood, Half-Breed, High-Yellow, Redbone, Mulatta. Nigger, Dago, Guinea."[39] In her answer, Ragusa disappears as a subject, yielding to an enumeration of categories separated by a slew of punctuation marks. Labels constrict individual experiences within predefined social contours, subsuming the particular under the general even when they are combined to better qualify specific social positions. Whereas the "what" causes a proliferation of descriptors, which cannot capture Ragusa's situation despite their very abundance, the "where" calls for a story that unfolds over time. Going back to the beginning of her life entails thinking about her home environment and the reasons that lie behind her strong identification with New York's landscape:

> 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

[36] Ibid., 25.
[37] Ibid.
[38] See Stuart Hall, "Race, the Floating Signifier: What More Is There to Say about Race?," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 359–73; Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 25. Emma Bond discusses the "visibility, temporality and textility" associated to skin metaphors in transnational contexts in *Writing Migration through the Body* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), chapter 2.
[39] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 25.

> transgressed by desire. The streets crossing east to west, north to south, like the web of veins beneath my skin.[40]

Isolated from the rest of the chapter, Ragusa's geo-ethnic self-description features several passive structures to denote both her lack of agency as a child and the impersonal inertia that characterizes the reproduction of social mechanisms. In a metaphorical crescendo, Ragusa suggests that the surface of her body reflects simultaneously the neighborhood's internal divisions and its urging for unity. She observes how the city streets intersect in ways that resemble her very veins. The association between traffic and blood circulation, which postulates that streets are to cities as veins and arteries are to living bodies, is frequent in everyday language and speaks in this passage to the determinist motif of the "blood."[41] Geography, society, and biology often collide in Ragusa's origin story. In this quote, however, the parallel between body and city remains within the order of representation. Ragusa makes an analogy, which accounts for the unbridgeable distance that separates words and categories from things and people: her veins are not the city streets; they are *like* the city streets. Such a nuance allows her to point out the simplification of reality that defines topography's codified interpretation of surfaces, whereby maps and labels constitute two similar forms of violence. The mediation between reality and representation entails in both instances a loss of complexity, as it avails itself of social templates. Topography may facilitate the understanding of an area, but it relies on preexisting conventions that privilege a normative approach to the objects it represents. The intersection image highlights thus not only Ragusa's hybrid origins and culturally composite background, but also the risk that her story may be absorbed into a flattened geography. As in the case of Crenshaw's Black woman, Ragusa's experiences require a theoretical framework capable of visualizing the marginality produced by multiple forms of domination; without this attention to positionality, the specificity of her situation may go unrecognized.[42]

For Ragusa, identity is not the addition of multiple essences; rather, as she states in an interview for an Italian journal, it is "un processo" ("a process") that results from the subject's own understanding of its relations to existing social structures. The writer embraces "un senso di identità…che va al di là dei legami di sangue" ("a sense of identity…that goes beyond blood relations") and that is not reducible to the combination of her two heritages.[43] This is why she could not accept the calls for "purity" coming from both sides of her family. In this regard, Gilda's attitude toward Kym is exemplary. As narrated in the memoir, Gilda is shocked to find out about the existence of her biracial granddaughter, whose birth her son had hidden from her, developing over time "an almost acrobatic capacity for contradiction and denial" that allows her to overlook Kym's mixed origins.[44] Through the frequent moves that take the Ragusa family from Harlem to

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[40] Ibid., 26.

[41] Scego similarly represents Mogadishu as a living organism in *La mia casa*, 24, 27. On the notion of "blood" in both African American and Italian American cultures, see John Gennari, *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 20.

[42] On the importance of a critical approach that makes it possible to capture the "interconnection" of multiple factors—including class, race, ethnicity, and gender—in each individual's life, see Livia Tenzer, "Documenting Race and Gender: Kym Ragusa Discusses *Passing* and *Fuori/Outside*," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 30, nos. 1–2 (2002): 214.

[43] Clara Antonucci, "Fare memoria delle storie perdute: Intervista a Kym Ragusa," *Leggendaria*, no. 80 (2010): 46. See also Kym Ragusa, "Ritorni," in "Origini: Le scrittrici italo americane," ed. Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Edvige Giunta, and Caterina Romeo, special issue, *TutteStorie*, no. 8 (2001): 72. Despite being conceived and executed in English, several of Ragusa's interviews and short pieces are available in print only in Italian translation.

[44] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 223.

the Bronx and finally to a New Jersey suburb, Kym undergoes a paradoxical "whitening" in Gilda's eyes. In keeping with general trends among white city dwellers in the 1980s, Gilda understands their flight from New York as a sign of social advancement, which manifests itself through the physical separation from the ethnic communities that gradually took over areas previously inhabited by Italian Americans. It is in this context that, sometime after they settled in Maplewood, NJ, Gilda opens up with Kym about her racial anxieties. Their neighbors' relocation makes her uncomfortable because she fears that people of color might take their place: "She looked from my face to the large, empty house outside the window. *I hope they're white*, she said. She said the words to me, speaking to me, but not really seeing me."[45] Gilda is unable to recognize her granddaughter for what and who she is. Interpreting family relations in assimilatory terms is a defensive mechanism against perceived threats from other social groups. Kym can be "blood of Gilda's blood" only through projection and identification. The window through which Gilda and Kym look in this scene is both a border that determines the boundaries of communal participation and a reflecting screen that generates fantasies of sameness. Indeed, as in the filmic rendering of this episode in *Fuori/Outside* (1997), transparent surfaces can turn into mirrors depending on the angle of vision and lighting. While Ragusa recounts the exchange she had years before with her grandmother in a voiceover, she shows the outside of Gilda's house, which appears impenetrable to the director's gaze because its windows reflect the sky and the surrounding trees. Similarly, in a later sequence, Ragusa shoots through an opaque window a family meal set in the same dining room captured in the Thanksgiving picture. The play of light in the shot makes it barely possible to recognize Gilda as she waves inside at her granddaughter; yet it also renders visible the image of the director herself, superimposed onto that of her family members in a visual stratification.[46] A metaphor for the skin, the window is a site of ambivalence that foregrounds the subject's spatial position as interpreter and its implication in enforcing or countering established social narratives.

In the Maplewood anecdote, Ragusa points to how geographies of sameness and difference revolve around essentialist notions of self and others. The dangerous repercussions of such an approach on the social fabric materialize for the writer in a doubling experience. More than two decades after her birth, a group of Italian American men killed an African American teenager who was walking through the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst, in the mistaken belief that he was dating a young woman from the area. Yusef Hawkins' murder set off racial tensions between the two communities, which both organized impassioned displays of protest. As she watched the news unfold on television, Ragusa recognized the racial dynamics that had shaped her life in the clash between the two groups, noticing that several Italian Americans demonstrating against the African American march in Bensonhurst "looked like people in [her] own family."[47] Intertwining

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[45] Ibid.

[46] Several scholars have focused on the significance of the superimposition of these images for an analysis of race in *Fuori/Outside*: Hiram Perez, "If You White, You Write: Teaching Race-Consciousness," *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy* 16, no. 1 (2005): 95; Valentina Seffer, "Identity on the Threshold: The Myth of Persephone in Italian American Women's Memoirs" (PhD dissertation, University of Sidney, 2015), 273–74; and Sabrina Vellucci, "The Topographies of Ethnicity in Kym Ragusa's *Passing*, *Fuori/Outside*, and *The Skin Between Us*," in *Contemporary Women's Cinema: Global Scenarios and Transnational Contexts*, ed. Veronica Pravadelli (Milan: Mimesis International, 2017), 196–97.

[47] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 224. Joseph Sciorra recounts the experience of being one of the few Italian Americans marching alongside the African American protesters on August 27, 1989 in a personal essay included in *Are Italians White?*: "Italians against Racism': The Murder of Yusuf Hawkins (R.I.P.) and My March on Bensonhurst" (192–209). In her own contribution to the volume, titled "*Sangu du Sangu Meu*: Growing up Black and Italian in a Time of White Flight," and later creatively incorporated into the memoir, Ragusa notes that "his [i.e., Sciorra's] essay was an inspiration, and in many ways, [hers] is a response to his" (312). Such racial tensions are also the subject of Spike

personal and collective histories, Ragusa reads in this episode the dreadful fate her parents might have incurred: "The policed borders of the body and the community, the illicit desire, the ancient rules broken, and the brutal consequences of such transgressions."[48] For Ragusa, Hawkins' tragic murder reenacts familiar mechanisms; for other Italian American writers, such as Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, it casts light on their own family's involvement in social structures of privilege. Like Ragusa, De Marco Torgovnick notices uncanny similarities between the Italian American protesters and her relatives. She too conceptualizes personal identities and intersubjective exchanges in spatial terms. The title of her memoir, *Crossing Ocean Parkway*, references one of the main streets that divided ethnic neighborhoods in Brooklyn, at the same time as it indicates forms of social and gender transgression.[49] As she attempts to make sense of the difficult intercultural relations that define the neighborhood where she grew up, De Marco Torgovnick draws on Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone," whereby "cultural interaction" is "understood according to a multidirectional model that play[s] itself out in many different ways and at many different levels over time."[50] Compared to the metaphor of the intersection, however, the contact zone foregrounds the originary separateness and individual histories of the communities confronting each other, rather than their interpenetration. The very idea of intercultural contact is predicated upon the act of "touching": such interaction occurs along the most external borders of the areas involved and may leave their nature unaltered. The fact that Pratt develops this paradigm to describe early modern colonial encounters in the Americas further emphasizes its limits for an analysis of New York's social and ethnic fabric: Pratt's key assumption about the "co-presen[ce]" of "subjects previously separated by geography and history" can speak only in part to the stratification of migrations in the contemporary American city.[51] Even when segregated and internally cohesive, New York's ethnic communities were well aware of their neighbors, with whom they engaged in processes of both differentiation and identification. Focusing on structural convergences, Ragusa's intersection shows such a reciprocal co-construction and, in so doing, unearths the story of marginal subjects caught in-between these groups.

Implications

The spatialization of identity that characterizes *The Skin Between Us* is rooted in historical time. For Ragusa, as for Adrienne Rich, "a place on the map is also a place in history": conceiving of the subject's location in relation to other individuals and social groups entails investigating the power imbalances that have shaped those relationships over time.[52] Along with the ocean, which stands for her relatives' forced migrations to America, New York and Palermo best exhibit the multiplicity of meanings that space embodies in Ragusa's autobiographical narrative. These two

Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991), which is dedicated to Hawkins' memory. On Lee's representation of these groups, see Gennari, *Flavor and Soul*, chapter 3.

[48] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 224.

[49] Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway: Readings by an Italian American Daughter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). De Marco Torgovnick composed and published the volume's first essay—titled "On Being White, Female, and Born in Bensonhurst"—in the aftermath of Hawkins' murder.

[50] Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, "*Crossing Ocean Parkway*: Memoir as Cultural Contact Zone," *Voices in Italian Americana* 7, no. 2 (1996), https://www.oocities.org/enza003/Via/ViaVol7_2DeMarcoTorgovnick.htm.

[51] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2008), 8.

[52] Adrienne Rich, "Notes towards a Politics of Location," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 212.

urban areas attest to a dual historical dimension, as they both show material traces from the past and house collective memories in the present. While New York features prominently in Ragusa's geo-ethnic self-portrait, Palermo first appears in the epilogue.[53] The memoir's Sicilian framework points to the entanglement of histories and geographies, casting Palermo as the European double of the American metropolis because it is not only a crossroads of cultures, but also the ideal meeting point of her ancestors. In both sites the past lives through the present according to spatial configurations: Harlem "is an almost geological formation, stratified by waves of migration, years of occupation and contestation, different communities who have all called it home"; Palermo features "layers of history, exposed as raw nerve, on the surfaces of buildings, in the dark eyes of the people [Ragusa] met."[54] Harlem's geological eras correspond to Palermo's historical time, which is further qualified, however, in physiological terms through the references to the "raw nerve" and the "dark eyes" of the city's inhabitants.

The writer's insistence on stratifications evokes a thick temporality that entangles subjects and communities alike, bringing together apparently distant realities. Not only does such a thickening connect multiple temporal dimensions, but it also foregrounds complex social relations, for lived environments are saturated with historical meanings.[55] Because of their dense temporality, Teresa Fiore has suggested that Ragusa's spaces are "pre-occupied" and can be read as "a silent (or silenced) palimpsest of stories."[56] Although Ragusa herself does not use this metaphor, drawing on natural rather than on cultural images to account for geography's history, Fiore's comparison makes it possible to see how the stratified past elicits refracted forms of collective accountability. As the medium where what is written is erased in order to make room for new inscriptions, the palimpsest presupposes an agent who intentionally superimposes heterogenous materials. As a consequence, it points to the social structures that created history's visible and invisible layers. At stake in Ragusa's memoir is the long-lasting "presence of prior experiences of relocation in space," which may interact in unforeseeable ways with present and future events.[57]

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[53] On Palermo, Sicily, and the liminal figure of Persephone, with which Kym identifies in the memoir's conclusion, see Edvige Giunta, "Persephone's Daughters," *Women's Studies* 33, no. 6 (2004): 767–86; Francesca de Lucia, "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*," in *Writing American Women: Text, Gender, Performance*, ed. Thomas Austenfeld and Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (Tübingen: Narr, 2009), 195–204; Tiziana de Rogatis, "*The Skin Between Us* di Kym Ragusa: Pregiudizio razziale, mito classico e identità femminile," in *Identità/diversità: Atti del III convegno dipartimentale dell'Università per stranieri di Siena (Siena, 4–5 dicembre 2012)*, ed. Tiziana de Rogatis, Giuseppe Marrani, Alejandro Patat, and Valentina Russi (Pisa: Pacini, 2013), 39–54; Seffer, "Identity on the Threshold"; Victoria Tomasulo, "Persephone's Descent: Place, Race, and Diasporic Self-Fashioning in *The Skin Between Us*," in "Disentangling the American Patchwork Heritage," ed. Francesco Chianese and Cristina Di Maio, special issue, *Journal of American Studies in Italy*, no. 4 (2021): 83–106; Cristina Di Maio, "'The Loss, the Search, the Story': Paradigma iniziatico e meditazione sull'identità afro-italo-americana in *The Skin Between Us* (2006)," in "Il Bildungsroman negli Stati Uniti: Una storia problematica," ed. Anna De Biasio and Fiorenzo Iuliano, special issue, *Ácoma*, no. 23 (2022): 125–44.

[54] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 145, 234.

[55] See Harry Harootunian, "Remembering the Historical Present," *Critical Inquiry*, no. 33 (2007): 471–94, on Edmund Husserl's similar notion of "'thickened' present," that is, "a present filled with traces of different moments and temporalities, weighted with sediments" (476).

[56] Fiore, *Pre-Occupied Spaces*, 57. In engaging with Fiore's notion of "pre-occupied spaces," I foreground geography's saturation of social and historical meanings ("pre-occupation"), rather than the subjects' and groups' emotional response to transnational mobility ("preoccupation"), and as a result emphasize how history reaches into the very formation of the social fabric.

[57] Ibid., 3.

Ragusa's belief in the multilayered nature of time sets her apart from her family. It is particularly her mother who does not share her sense of temporal imbrication. Unnamed and rarely introduced as an active interlocutor in the narrative, Ragusa's mother objects to her requests to cast light on certain aspects of their shared history, in the belief that "memory" is "an irritation, a waste of time."[58] In one of the few exchanges between mother and daughter reported in the text, the mother defends a point of view that sharply cuts ties between the past and the future: "The present is the only thing that matters to my mother, and the future is the only thing worth wondering about. The future is where things can still turn out right….My mother can't imagine why I would want to root into all those murky places in our history."[59] If the mother associates the past with traumatic experiences that it is pointless to recall, the daughter seeks to unearth the roots that connect her to her family's origins. As Ragusa elucidates in a later interview, "Ci sono ragioni che spingono i membri della mia famiglia a non voler parlare di certe cose ed è loro diritto volersene disfare, ma io…voglio quelle storie. Per me non sono legate allo stesso dolore. Le voglio perché sono le fondamenta, perché hanno finito per fare di me quella che sono" ("There are reasons why my family members don't want to talk about certain things, and it's their right to want to get rid of them, but I…want those stories. For me, they are not connected to the same pain. I want them because they are the foundations, because they ended up making me who I am").[60] Both her family's past and geographical location shaped Ragusa for what and who she is: her memorial quest is predicated on the acknowledgement of this embeddedness in temporally dense social environments. Such an introspective narrative reexamines the tenets that structure her lived experiences, since she believes that her personal story speaks to the stratification of larger phenomena. Recovering the past that inhabits the present allows her to better understand her intersectional position; in turn, this self-reflexive approach opens up spaces of collective reflection that can lead to social change.[61]

As part of her critical rooting, Ragusa has to confront the temporal reverberations of her social inheritance. Imagining that the subject is caught up in social mechanisms that transcend it, Ragusa casts the intersections as the ideal site to excavate layers of collective responsibility and engage with the legacies that result from social forms of implications. In the words of Michael Rothberg, the term "implication" "draws attention to how we are 'folded into' (im-pli-cated in) events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects."[62] In recounting her life and that of her family members, Ragusa demonstrates how subjects can embark upon critical enterprises, demanding racial justice and gender equality, at the same time as they work through the positional inheritance that derives from their "folded-togetherness."[63] The "interlocking systems of oppression" that define society affect all individuals to different degrees for they stem from and trigger in turn a wide range of social mechanisms.[64] Because of this complex system, which

[58] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 61.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Antonucci, "Fare memoria delle storie perdute," 47.
[61] Evelyn Ferraro analyzes Ragusa's "contesting" attitude in "Southern Encounters in the City: Reconfiguring the South from the Liminal Space," in *Small Towns, Big Cities: The Urban Experience of Italian Americans*, ed. Dennis Barone and Stefano Luconi (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 2010), 219–27.
[62] Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject*, 1.
[63] Ibid., 13.
[64] The notion of "interlocking systems of oppression," an antecedent of "intersectionality," is developed in the mid-1970s by the Combahee River Collective, a Boston-based Black feminist group. See Carastathis, *Intersectionality*, chapter 1, and Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, ed., *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2017).

Rothberg calls "the transmission belt of domination," those who bear the brunt of discrimination may nonetheless gain relative benefits from inherited social privileges and contribute unwillingly to other regimes of disciplinary control.[65]

Ragusa reflects on her own involvement in histories and legacies of violence when she recalls her earliest memories living in Harlem. Among the many names she is able to remember from her childhood years, Kym cannot include that of her daytime nanny, whose voice however has long stayed with her. Despite not having clear memories of her, Ragusa remembers that she sang lullabies to her in an unfamiliar language and that her skin was much darker than that of her African American relatives. The recollection of this woman from the Caribbean makes the author experience discomfort, to the point of feeling "ashamed" of her involuntary participation in "the long history of black women's bodies and labor used in the service of white women and their children, of slave-owning freedpeople and their privileged descendants."[66] Ragusa is well aware that her descent from Sybela Owens, a light-skinned slave who ran away with her white owner's son, provided her with a position of relative privilege in an American society that has been for centuries polarized into the two socially constructed opposites of whiteness and Blackness. At the same time, being situated among multiple communities imposed other forms of exclusion upon her. During her childhood, her African American classmates called her "whitey," whereas her Italian American relatives systematically erased her Blackness.[67] On at least one occasion, her cousin Marie willfully denied Kym's origins through a racial slur, justifying her skin color to playmates in the Bronx on the grounds that it was getting dark outside and visibility was poor.[68]

As she meditates upon her nanny's life story, and its racial entanglements with her family's, Ragusa owns up to her social position, which allows her to identify temporal and memorial connections that until that point went unnoticed: "I began my life within the shadow of a past that is impossible to escape. 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."[69] Through the figure of the Caribbean nanny, Ragusa bears witness to social implication. She demonstrates how "race, and its contradictions, were embedded in [her] most innocent thoughts and desires" already at an early age.[70] A few centuries separate her from the time in which the Atlantic slave trade was in effect; although she was not subjected to, nor complicit with, slavery's disciplinary regime, she still has to come to terms with its pervasive shadow. The but-clause in the previous passage points to the role that the nanny had in promoting belated critical awareness in the child, nurturing it with her diasporic narratives. Thanks to this dark-skinned woman—an invisible figure who may have fallen through the cracks of history had it not been for this personal homage—Ragusa foregrounds how the past lingers in, at times even haunts, the present. Such a past, however, can also lay the groundwork for imagining alternative futures: the woman's seed created the conditions for later reappropriations and reenactments of slavery's legacies. *The Skin Between Us* fulfills that potential, reckoning with the multilayered historical past the two women shared. Demonstrating how time unfolds in both geographical and social space, Ragusa points to the connections between

[65] This is how Rothberg titles the first chapter of *The Implicated Subject*. Rothberg acknowledges the importance of intersectionality—especially in its Combahee River Collective formulation—for a theory of implication; however, he also suggests that "it tends to foreground a standpoint far from that position" (34). In showing the connections between these two paradigms in Ragusa's memoir, I hope to show that intersectional thinking is not necessarily victim-oriented.
[66] Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*, 34.
[67] Ibid., 156.
[68] Ibid., 179.
[69] Ibid., 34.
[70] Ibid.

cultural hybridity and social marginality in her story. For her, reflecting on her origins is inseparable from an understanding of the social mechanisms that made those possible in the first place. Far from being flat social constructs, intersections are forms of spatial and temporal implication.