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Southern Encounters in the City: Reconfiguring the South from the Liminal Space

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In *Il pensiero meridiano,* sociologist Franco Cassano claims that the cultural autonomy of the South hinges upon a radical redefinition of the relationship between South and North. Dominant representations of the South as a "not-yet North"[1] (Cassano viii), always imperfectly mimicking a more advanced North, found themselves on the idea of a linear transition from backwardness to development where the differences are often reduced to a matter of time. If Gramsci, in *The Southern Question,* deconstructed the Italian North/South binarism by suggesting potential alliances among non-dominant groups (namely, Northern workers and Southern peasants), Cassano proposes a spatial rethinking of the South where the connections between the South of Italy and those of the world, particularly the Southern Mediterranean coast, are paramount for the construction of the South as an "other" viewpoint, autonomous and relational at the same time.[2] In order to reach

[1]All translations from *Il pensiero meridiano* are mine.

[2]According to Cassano, physical and cultural distance, difference, confrontation, balance and alternative perceptions of space and time are all attributes of an autonomous South, capable of self-reflection and site of multiple voices. While these concepts offer suggestive insights to my exploration of southern connections, Cassano's view of the South as epistemologically different from the North-West adds complexity to it. In fact, these two spaces that he conceives independently delineate a typical pattern of migration among Italians, inside and outside of Italy. In this sense, my reading of Ragusa's memoir both relies on and complicates Cassano's argument, as I try to connect the Mediterranean to other, historically displaced and imagined Souths. For an analysis of Cassano's search for a "subalternized archive of potentially redeemable humanistic values" in the ancient Mediterranean, see Bouchard. The latter states that "the connections that Cassano draws seek to establish a transnational dialogue among peripheral zones that, despite their differences, share some commonalities" that, for Bouchard, are to be located in the peripheral position of "merid-

this goal, Cassano's "meridian thinking" advocates a cognitive transformation of our relationship with places, a key point that I will address in this paper through a reading of Kym Ragusa's memoir *The Skin Between Us* (2006). If the "meridian thinking" manifests itself in multiple and scattered forms,[3] my main purpose is to investigate Ragusa's narrative, primarily set in the city of New York, with respect to the kind of southern exchange that Cassano hopes for. To this end, I will analyze the specific ways in which racial boundaries are inscribed in space within the memoir, and highlight the centrality of the journey to Palermo, and thus the Mediterranean, as a source of cultural belonging for the biracial author.

Places matter in *The Skin Between Us* and equally important is how they are viewed. Except for the narrator's visit to Sicily, which significantly frames the book, we are not offered a first sight of places, but rather a "re-vision," a key operation that Cassano terms "riguardare i luoghi," which literally means both to look at places again (*tornare a guardare*) and take care of them (*avere riguardo*), or, as he puts it, "to look at the map again, broaden one's vision beyond the national borders, make out new connections, new proximities and distances" but also "to transform one's cognitive and emotional ties to them" (x). As an adult woman, Kym Ragusa *riguarda* (i.e., looks back at and takes care of) the places of her childhood in New York and engages in a sort of *recherche des lieux perdus* in order to make sense of the cultural intricacies of her biracial identity.

The skin is the focus of her critical lens, as around this site personal and social tensions frequently grow and burst into racial violence. Edvige Giunta

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ione" not only in Italy and Europe but also in relation to its history of massive migrations (306). While Cassano's focus is territorially circumscribed within the Mediterranean, the link between the subaltern position of the South and transoceanic emigration is at the center of Verdicchio's theorization (based on Gramsci) of the Southern Italian emigrant as a "decontextualized subaltern" in his *Bound by Distance*.

[3]Cassano states that today the meridian thinking "exists in scattered and sometimes sick forms . . . : you can find it in our inner souths, in madness, in a silence . . . in sentiments where more countries live together, where the many veils of truth replace the simple yes or no" (9). In other words, *pensiero meridiano* is not attached to a proper territory, but it starts at the conjunction of land and sea, "when the seashore interrupts the fundamentalisms of the land," when borderlines, rather than announcing the end of something, become the site where "the others come in touch" and the challenge of the exchange with the Other begins seriously (7). Thus, in Cassano's discourse, the borders are the site of balance between land (i.e., shared identity, belonging, social ties) and sea (i.e., departure, journey, individual freedom).

has pointed out that in Ragusa's work "race does not solidify as a physical reality. It takes shape as a constellation of exploratory moments, all interconnected, all equally elusive" (226). The investigation of boundaries carried out in the videos *Passing* (1996) and *fuori/outside* (1997)[4] continues with a wider scope in the memoir *The Skin Between Us*. The physical reality of skin, with its troubling shades of color, is the ground where unstable boundaries are first drawn:

> Three variations on ivory, yellow, olive, refracted between us like a kaleidoscope. The skin between us: a border, a map, a blank page. History and biology. The skin between us that kept us apart, and sheltered us against the hurt we inflicted on each other. The skin between us: membrane, veil, mirror. A shared skin. (25)

However, the ambiguous nature of borders imprinted on the body is also visible in the surrounding extracorporeal reality:

> 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. (26)

The two passages above deal with material and mental borders within family and neighborhood, spaces that in Ragusa's journey are inextricably interconnected. In the first one, the narrator comments on a family picture portraying herself and her grandmothers, Miriam and Gilda, whose lives intersected unexpectedly in New York in the 1960s, at a hostile time between the Italian and African American communities that the two women represent. The shades of color may not be very different for the light-skinned Miriam and the southern Italian Gilda, but the awareness of the stakes enclosed in the US color line is a powerful source of opposition between them.

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[4] *Passing* is based on Ragusa's maternal grandmother's recollection of a road trip to Miami in 1959 and it illustrates the ambiguity of racial identity. *Fuori/outside* explores the filmmaker's problematic relationship with her Italian American grandmother and community. For a detailed analysis, see Giunta.

Gilda feels ashamed at the idea that "the whole neighborhood knew by now that my father brought a nigger, a *moulignan'*, into his house" (30). And Miriam does not seem enthusiastic either about this pairing: "If my mother was going to aim for a white man, why not something better? My father was barely white" (29).

To properly understand the reasons behind these racial remarks, they must be examined in the specific context of New York's Harlem, which the second passage refers to. The presence of Italian immigrants in the northeast section of Manhattan dates back to the 1870s and, by the mid 1920s, this area, East Harlem, was already known as Italian Harlem.[5] Its territory was not separated from West or Black Harlem by actual borders, but Italians, African Americans, and other ethnic groups that moved in later on, recognized which sections they would "fit in" and which ones they had to keep away from. The proximity of the Italian immigrants, who were predominantly southerners, to dark-skinned people was not only geographical, but also imagined, as the former have been connected with the latter "for the length of their history in this country" (Orsi 317). As the Italians learned how race is socially constructed in the American landscape, and realized that success in the new environment could not be divorced from whiteness, they started a struggle to escape the "dilemma of inbetweenness"[6] that entangled them across the country by differentiating themselves from other groups with darker skin. Through this "strategy of alterity" or "Harlem strategy," as Orsi calls it, many groups tried to define themselves against a racial other since the 1930s. Marking out the borders, even when they were not materially there, became a crucial element of the racial and cultural process of differentiation between the newly forged identity of Italian Americans and other ethnic selves. This strategy intensified hostilities between African and Italian Americans, as the latter also attempted to erase their history and geography of proximity to the former by leaving East Harlem for better housing in the

[5]I follow here Robert Orsi's historical account (esp. 319–22).

[6]For Orsi, four factors contributed to the "dilemma of inbetweenness" for southern Italian immigrants in northern and Midwestern cities: "the use of racist categories by northern Italians" against southerners, "the assumption of this same discourse by American commentators," "the coincidence of this [southern] migration with the movement of other darker skinned peoples into North American cities, and the determination of southern Italians to make dignified lives for themselves" in the new context (314).

suburbs in the 1940s and 1950s. For many, moving out of the inner city, away from the dark-skinned other, carried a strong symbolic meaning in that it signified moving up toward whiteness.[7]

This brief account of the evolution of border-making in Harlem provides the geo-cultural background in which several elements of Ragusa's text can be inscribed: the opposing views of Miriam and Gilda on each other's community; the racial comments made by local people whenever borders are crossed; the tactics implemented to make safe places that allow for risky circumstances; and finally, Kym's own Italian family's "white flight" from East Harlem to the Bronx and eventually to New Jersey.

Furthermore, the two passages of the memoir quoted above, with their peculiar blend of geographical and corporeal language and their insistence on "map," "border," and other related words, hint at where the author positions herself and how she articulates her discourse on race and belonging. As a young girl, Kym Ragusa experiences linguistic, social and cultural barriers as part of her traveling between two families, two homes, and two neighborhoods. Her attempts "to negotiate the distance" between her grandmothers do not always succeed, and after their almost concurrent deaths, her life is still "cleaved in half" (19). "To negotiate the distance" is the ambitious goal of *The Skin Between Us,* and for the author it fundamentally means to contest borders and to envision grounds for communication between diasporic groups and cultures. Ragusa undertakes the task by choosing to speak from the liminal space that she embodies and from her marginal condition of racial and cultural inbetweenness.

She tackles the challenges of negotiation by resorting to three operations, namely contesting, disordering, and connecting, which I will briefly outline. Contesting consists in the ability to expose the fallacy of certain notions and perceptions of space that discourage any intercultural dialogue. Of his old neighborhood, East Harlem, Kym's father recalls that "it was safe, it was clean, it was 'our' place, . . . so safe you didn't even have to lock your door" because only Italian families lived there and had created a strong sense of community based on their perception of territorial possession. Ragusa sees all the seduction involved in the "fantasy of total community, total belong-

[7]On the question of the culturally constructed whiteness of Italian immigrants in the United States, see also Guglielmo and Salerno, and Roediger, in particular part II, "Inbetweenness.

ing" (119), but she refuses it since the "mythology" of a safe Italian Harlem "could only exist with the exclusion of those deemed outsiders" (120). Against this ethnocentric viewpoint, the narrator underscores the irony of her Italian family's white flight to the suburbs along with a half African American child and the Puerto Rican girlfriend of her father. Besides, a major instance of critical distance regards specifically Gilda who seems to be haunted by the proximity of the dark-skinned other even after moving to her new house in New Jersey. While watching the movers take away the furniture from the next-door house, Gilda expresses out loud her hope that the new neighbors are white. Kym remains silent but rages inside as she realizes that in spite of the years spent with her paternal grandmother under the same roof, Gilda's love for her will always be partial because of her ingrained racial prejudice (223).

These few examples point out that Ragusa's project of negotiation requires first of all that she contests and distances herself from any exclusionary and narrow-minded positions and practices, including those to which her family members abide by. Her exploration of multiple borders reminds us that they are "physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where . . . classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy," according to Anzaldúa's definition of Borderlands (preface). However, the South that Ragusa embodies and has in mind is not the border between the US and Mexico, but a more faraway one, the Mediterranean, the place of origin of her maternal and paternal ancestors, and a "disquieting space" of "liquid materiality" (Chambers 5). From this natural, fluid, and porous border between Europe and Africa, Ragusa's *pensiero meridiano* rises and flows across and beyond "the fundamentalisms of the land" which are rooted in rigid configurations of place, ethnic and cultural belonging (Cassano 7). She looks at the Mediterranean from New York, descends into it through her physical journey to Sicily, and in that liminal space she also imaginatively builds bridges across borders by disordering traditional boundaries and suggesting new linkages. Without diminishing the violence that the contact of Italian and African Americans in New York has historically produced, Ragusa searches for elements that may transform that encounter into a terrain of positive exchange. Digging into her memory, for instance, she recalls that it was her African American grandmother Miriam who introduced her to the ancient Greek/Sicilian myth of Persephone and encouraged her to claim it

as her own, the story of the "girl who is always leaving, whose every homecoming is a goodbye" (107). On the other hand, Kym was first exposed to jazz music thanks to her father who would play jazz records for her and tell her about the music of his favorite African American musicians when she was a child. And yet another boundary is disordered when Kym Ragusa returns to East Harlem for the Feast of the Madonna of Mount Carmel to take part in the traditional procession throughout the streets of the neighborhood that was once Italian Harlem, and that resembles a "geological formation" for the layers of migration that it has witnessed (145). The connection here between Italian and African images is embedded in the larger choral scene of devotion to the Madonna, where skins of every color and voices singing in four different languages blend in for a moment: "[h]undreds of people around me, mostly women, Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Haitians, all moving together like an exhalation of breath . . . voices filling the air in Spanish and Italian, French and Creole" (143-4).

Through these cross-cultural references Ragusa disorders the boundaries between two socially constructed opposite identities, the Italian and the African, and makes them intersect in unexpected places and according to new trajectories that sustain that broader vision of the South advocated by Cassano. Indeed, the journey to Sicily that parenthetically encloses the nine chapters of the memoir emphasizes the connection between marginalized global Souths. After viewing "the island's body unfolding like a woman's" (234) from the mountains of Enna, where Demeter and Persephone first lost each other, Kym explores the streets of Palermo. In a few pages, she describes her last night in the old Arab quarter of the city, *la Kalsa,* among the ruins of buildings bombed during World War II and occupied by low income Sicilians, African and Asian immigrants. To express the neglected state of that area by city authorities and better-off *palermitani,* her newly met blond Sicilian friend draws a simile with a familiar place: "*Palermo is like your Harlem - we are the blacks of Italy. And la Kalsa is the Harlem of Palermo*" (235; italics in original). Through this figurative detour, *la Kalsa,* from its local position of otherness (a South within a South), is transported into a much larger circuit where unconventional associations can be activated. In fact, while "*the blacks of Italy*" recalls the well-known topos of the subaltern and racialized Italian South within the traditional North/South relationship, the memoir seems to proceed, in its epilogue, in the direction of a possible encounter between transnational southern identities within the globalized space of *la Kalsa.* In

this corner of Sicily, Kym is the outsider; she records what she sees and hears around her: young men listening to rap music, little Bengali girls speaking to each other in Sicilian, African prostitutes guarded by their pimps, local artists, a biracial woman like her, African and Sicilian boys playing soccer together, and wild plants and feral cats sharing the ruins of such an awkward urban space. "For a moment" she says "I lost track of where I was - was it Palermo, or Cairo, or Lagos, or Harlem?" (237). These few examples suggest that *la Kalsa* is a site that synecdochically contains the global Souths and their multiple voices, cultures, and skin colors. Moreover, it appears to fulfill Ragusa's general goal of negotiation, even if more as a utopian rather than an actualized space of border crossing, exchange, and alliance between subaltern subjects. Indeed, the narrator's penetration of the social reality of *la Kalsa* seems to remain somewhat superficial and, in any case, relegated to the margins of the book. However, although not fully developed in the text, these instances of "meridian thinking," along with the others analyzed in this paper, invite to reconsider, or look at again, the concept of southern connections in a larger, transnational, framework centered on the common liminal positions of (migrant and non-migrant) groups with heterogeneous historical backgrounds, and emphasizing the "irreducible pluriverse" of the Mediterranean (Cassano xxiv) inside as well as outside its territorial borders. In the interconnected spatialities of race and belonging beyond national boundaries, Kym Ragusa ultimately envisions the possibility of negotiating the distance between Gilda and Miriam, and between fair, dark and darker-skinned people. And finally, the choice of Palermo and the liminal and relatively unsafe neighborhood of *la Kalsa* in order to link her personal story to other experiences of inbetweenness, is consistent with the writer's strategic use of marginality. Like her favorite and closing image of Persephone "choosing her own fate" (238), Ragusa chooses marginality as site of resistance against essentialisms and as "location of radical openness and possibility" (hooks 53) across geographical, cultural, and color borders.

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