



Voices from the Gaps

Kym Ragusa

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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.

— The Skin Between Us (26)

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Biography

In the prologue of her acclaimed memoir, *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa writes of a journey she took in 1999 to her paternal ancestors' home of Messina, Italy. A year after the death of her two grandmothers—the central figures in her personal life, each representing her Italian and African-American heritage respectively—Ragusa embarks on a search for clues about her identity. This journey is symbolic of her artistic work as she is constantly involved in the formulation and explication of what it means to be multicultural.

Kym Ragusa was born February of 1966 in Manhattan, NY. Ragusa comes from a mixed background: her mother is African American and her father is Italian. Ragusa's ancestors on her mother's side were brought to the United States as African slaves.

Quick Facts

- * Born in 1966
- * Of Italian and African-American heritage
- * Filmmaker, memoirist, and essayist

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Kym Ragusa

Biography continued

Ragusa's paternal line is Italian. Ragusa's grandfather Luigi and his wife, Gilda, moved to the United States with their daughter Angela and son (Ragusa's father, whose name is not given for privacy purposes) from Messina, Italy, settling in Bronx, NY. While living in the Bronx, Ragusa's parents met at Columbia University in Harlem, where they worked in low-level positions. They dated for a short period and never married, because Luigi and Gilda disapproved of their relationship. Gilda was opposed on racial grounds and it took her and Kym a long time to see each other eye-to-eye. Ragusa's grandmother Miriam was opposed to her daughter's relationship based on Ragusa's father's social class as a poor immigrant. When Ragusa's father was sent off to Vietnam, her parents' relationship deteriorated. When Ragusa's father returned from war, he was addicted to heroin and in no condition to raise a child; his addiction continued throughout the rest of his life. Because of this, Ragusa lived with her mother and her grandmother, Miriam, throughout most of her life and hardly saw her father. When Ragusa was introduced to her father, she was in middle school. Her father was dating a Puerto Rican woman named Carmen. Ragusa was introduced to her grandparents, Gilda and Luigi, not as her father's daughter, but as Carmen's niece. Her father was still not ready to acknowledge that he had a child, but eventually the secret was revealed to her grandparents when she came to live with them in Maplewood, New Jersey. After a short car ride to her new home Ragusa remembers "feeling timid, wondering if (she) really belonged there after all" (*The Skin Between Us* 187). In Maplewood, Ragusa attended public schools, wore generic brand-name clothing, and spent most of her early teenage years in a clearly segregated community. "You could stand on our side of Irvington and be surrounded by white people ... and you'd look across the street and see only black people" (189).

Ragusa attended various schools throughout her childhood including Convent of the Sacred Heart and Clinton School. After high school Ragusa continued on to college. She earned an M.A. in Media from the New School for Social Research and later taught Writing and Film Studies at Eugene Lang College and the City University of New York. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

The Bronx has long been a home to immigrants from many cultures. The Bronx first experienced a flood of immigrants after World War I; French, German, Jewish, and Polish immigrants moved into the borough. By the 1950's, the Bronx was populated mostly by Hispanic and African American populations as Irish and Italian immigrants moved to suburban areas or different states. During the 1960's, the quality of life in the Bronx declined sharply; this was due to largely racist practices such as redlining and "urban renewal" projects.



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Like the Bronx, Harlem became a center in a movement of Black culture in the 1920's, known as the "Harlem Renaissance." Ragusa's grandmother, Miriam, lived in an apartment in Harlem in the early 1950's. Miriam experienced many aspects of Harlem; it was a thriving center for artistic growth, and it was also the heart of social change and political activism for black people in New York City. Ragusa's grandmother refers to Harlem as a "black mecca" because it was a place of important social movements and change.

Harlem of the 1950's was a place of growing popular unrest, of picket lines and boycotts and increasing activism among ordinary black people: apartment building tenants, schoolteachers, men who had come back home from the front lines of WWII and found that their heroism abroad had not translated into jobs and equal rights back home. These became Miriam's neighbors, her friends, her lovers. All of it made Harlem what it was (*The Skin Between Us* 44).

The Skin Between Us is a culmination of the themes that Ragusa has explored in her films and articles. The memoir explores racial identity, personal belonging, and community. In *The Skin Between Us* Ragusa writes with tenderness and honesty about her memories and the personalities of her ancestors. It is written in lyrical prose that gives the text a sense of intimacy, melancholy and remembrance. Ragusa's vision in this text is one of belonging. Ragusa recalls the pain of searching for personal identity and belonging in a racially divided family, community, and culture. The confusion of racial identity permeates the most intimate aspects of Ragusa's life and these are the same intimate raw experiences that Ragusa shares with the reader.

For Ragusa, her storytelling is a source of healing and belonging; she recalls and retells the stories of the women in her family history with loving detail. Ragusa tells the courageous tale of her ancestor Sybela, a woman who was brought to the U.S. as a slave to work on a plantation. Ragusa traces the courage and strength of all of the women in her families and considers how these women have shaped her own identity. Ragusa also focuses on the importance of community. She writes the communities of her youth into the text as if they were characters, describing the historical events of the communities accurately. In particular, Ragusa shares her love for Harlem, where her grandmother worked as a civil rights activist and where Ragusa lived as a youth.



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Biography continued

Kym Ragusa's personal sense of division and separation mirrors the divisions that exist in communities across the United States. Ragusa offers a fresh, unique perspective on what it means to belong to a community and what it means to belong to a family. Her voice is of crucial importance in a racially divided America and it serves as a reminder that all identities are complex.

Ragusa contributes her own memory about Italian cooking in a chapter called "Baked Ziti." Baked ziti is a dish comprising of stuffed pasta baked like casserole and served in many Italian homes. Ragusa remembers her father cooking baked ziti, "enough to feed an army, which he did once" (276). Ragusa recounts "I am hiding behind the camera. Through the lens I watch what's left of this family, which is my own family, go through the motions of an ancient ritual, preparing the feast day meal" (277). Ragusa uses the tradition of cooking, viewed through the lens of her camcorder, to reflect on her family's values (such as good cooking, proper seasoning, and patience) and how food brings them together as a family. Ragusa writes this chapter from memory and partially from viewing the tape she recorded many years earlier. Due to the time that has passed, she writes with the knowledge that both her father and Susan, her father's girlfriend, will die shortly after of AIDS. Ragusa also writes with the knowledge that her grandmother will pass away soon after as well, leaving her to reminisce "with my ghosts, and eat" (282). "Baked Ziti" appeared in *The Milk of Almonds: Italian Women Writers on Food and Culture*, a collection of works by Italian American women compiled by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta. These women seek to explain how they feel about being Italian in America and how cultural traditions related to food have affected their lives. Chapters have titles such as "Love Lettuce," "Let Them Eat Cake," and "Cutting the Bread."





Kym Ragusa

Biography continued

Reminiscing in films and documentaries is a method Ragusa commonly uses to communicate the struggles she and her family have encountered. One of Ragusa's most expressive films is *Passing*. Also detailed on page 197 of *The Skin Between Us*, *Passing* is a story told by Miriam, Ragusa's maternal grandmother, about a picnic trip she took and her experience in a southern café where she encountered racism. The film is a series of photographs and short clips containing no actors, with Miriam's voice narrating the story. Upon review of the film by an African-American Studies class at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, students were asked a variety of questions and developed unique interpretations. Many students felt that the fact that no physical characters are present forces the viewer to make a more personal reaction to the images present than if actors were used. Actors, while meaning to portray someone other than themselves, bring connotations and auras that cannot be removed from the viewer's eye. It is also easier for a viewer to position him/herself in the place of the camera if actors are not present. This point of view offers a first person or third person presentation based on the viewer's preference. The fact that images are blurry and the camera is not steady but constantly moving also gives the sensation of reviewing a memory instead of watching a well edited film. Reactions to Miriam's statement made in the café included "she's bold," "she's only saying what others were thinking," and that "she's breaking stereotypes when she calls herself a nigger with pride!" (AFRO3592 class, February 16, 2007). It is also important to notice that the camera blurs as Miriam speaks the words, causing the viewer to focus more on her authoritative vocal tone instead of what she is saying. *Passing* is not only a film depicting the racial oppression of the South during the 1940's, but also a reflection of the values of strength, feminism, and liberalism of the Ragusa family.

Kym Ragusa speaks on two of her films, *Passing* and *Fuori/Outside*, in an interview with Livia Tenzer in a 2002 edition of the *Women's Studies Quarterly*. The article reveals Ragusa's desire to emphasize the process of identity construction and how central race and gender are to that equation. *Fuori/Outside* is presented as a "letter to you" for Ragusa's Italian grandmother Gilda. Gilda was the relative most opposed to the idea of having a granddaughter with African-American heritage. In the interview, Ragusa highlights the way that Gilda's fear and isolation in New York City infused her opposition to African-Americans and the overall move of many Italian Americans to identify with "whiteness and the dominant culture instead of a politicized otherness" (217).



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Fuori/Outside reflects on the racism within Ragusa's family and in her community. Ragusa talks about racism against African Americans by New Yorkers from Southern Italy who had experienced racism themselves. The film was published in 1997 and is thirteen minutes in length.

Ragusa also reveals an interest in "the hidden histories of working-class women, whose daily acts of courage and resistance have often gone unacknowledged" (214); a theme present in her writings. She claims that the use of black and white film in *Passing* was a "commentary on the artificial racial binary of black and white" (216). In closing, she brings to light the "secret history of oppression by men ... alongside the story of racial/ethnic oppression" (218) that emerges in both *Passing* and *Fuori/Outside*.

Taxi-Vala: An Autobiography is a documentary produced in 1994 by Ragusa's husband Vivek Renjen Bald. Ragusa helped Bald by filming and editing the documentary, which was distributed by MutinySounds. Similar to Ragusa's other works, *Taxi-Vala* discusses the struggles and oppression of South Asian taxi drivers in New York City. The documentary begins with a second-generation bi-racial Indian-American who encounters a variety of recent immigrants working as taxi-drivers. The drivers work twelve-hour shifts often well over 40 hours a week and receive little compensation for personal losses. The autobiography matches Ragusa's works in subjects of racial discrimination and the personal struggle to identify oneself within a community and within a multi-racial nation.

Another of Ragusa's films, *Demarcations*, was produced in 1992, is five minutes long, and was recorded in color. Ragusa utilizes the female form as the terrain to examine recollections of a rape. The filmmaker emphasizes the manner by which identity and exoticism are played out on the level of the female body.

Though Kym Ragusa has not written an extensive amount of material, her films and single memoir tell a lot about her family and her values. As a dynamic artist, Ragusa's films allow her to focus on themes and characters that are preeminent in her memoir. Having been raised in one of the toughest cities in the United States, Ragusa learned of the confrontations and conflicts that exist between different cultures in New York at an early age. Her parents' different ethnic backgrounds preventing their marriage, Ragusa's experiences with racism and cultural elitism shaped her from the beginning of her life. Ragusa's childhood was heavily influenced by her grandmother's activism and participation in social change, her mother's desire for education, and the strong traditions of her Italian lineage. These factors dominate Ragusa's works and make her the influential writer and filmmaker she is today.



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Biography continued

Works by the author

Memoir

The Skin Between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging (2006).

Film

Demarcation (1992)

Fuori/Outside (1997)

Passing (1997)

Taxi-Vala: An Autobiography (1994)

Essays

“Baked Ziti” in *The Milk of Almonds: Italian-American Women Writers on Food and Culture*, ed. Louise A. DeSalvo, Edvige Giunta (Feminist Press, 2002).

“Sangu Du Sangu Meu” in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. Jennifer Guglielmo et al. (Routledge, 2003).

Interviews

Giunta, Edvige. “Figuring Race: Kym Ragusa’s *Fuori/Outside*” in *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration Between Two Communities* (American Italian Historical Association, 1999).

Tenzer, Livia. *Documenting Race and Gender: Kym Ragusa Discusses Passing and Fuori/Outside* (Feminist Press, 2002).

Reel New York. “Interview with Kym Ragusa” (2007).

Works in languages other than English

Tutte Storie: Racconto letture trame di donne Origini-Le Scrittrici Italo-Americane: Ritorni (Nexus, 2001).