

Identity on the Threshold:
The Myth of Persephone in
Italian American Women's Memoirs

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses the recurrent theme of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in third-generation Italian American women's memoirs. I argue that these women appropriate their Italian ethnic roots through a creative and compelling rereading and reworking of the myth of Demeter and Persephone. To develop my argument, I explore the interlacing of myth and memory in three contemporary Italian American memoirs: *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992), *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging* (2006), and *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America* (2011), respectively written by Susan Caperna Lloyd, Kym Ragusa, and Joanna Clapps Herman. These texts belong to the hybrid genre of memoir; a genre that combines imagination with individual and collective memory. Through the genre of memoir and the practice of self-writing, these authors turn to the myth as a source for female empowerment and ethnic assertion. The myth of Persephone in these Italian American women's memoirs epitomizes the archetype of origin so it becomes a treasure to be sought and rediscovered.

These texts offer insightful perspective on myth while also posing questions of difference, gender, race, ethnicity, self-representation, and post-modern identity. Through an eclectic approach, including literary criticism, cultural studies, and anthropology, I argue that these three memoirs show how the authors' physical and/or psychological journeys between Italy and America have helped them to overcome the anxieties experienced in relation to their Italian American hybrid identity. This thesis explores the themes of liminality, ethnicity, race, and hybridity to understand how the

Persephone myth is used by the authors to articulate their condition as dwellers of the *limen*, and to help them come to terms with the trauma of loss, separation, and reunion.

Introduction

In 2006, Italian film director Emanuele Crialese's *Nuovomondo* (*The Golden Door*) was awarded the Leone d'Argento in Venice. *Nuovomondo* chronicles the story of the Mancusos, a Sicilian family that left the island at the beginning of the twentieth century to migrate to America. The Mancusos' story symbolizes the stories of many Italian families, of men and women who abandoned their land in search of better opportunities. One of the film's most touching and suggestive moments is the scene of the family's departure from the Sicilian port of Palermo.¹ The scene is filmed from the top – reminding us of Alfred Stieglitz's famous photograph *The Steerage* (1907) – and is accompanied by a solemn silence. We see a crowd of people: some are on the boat's deck, ready to leave for America; the others are standing on the dock, waving their last goodbye to their families and dear ones. The two crowds form initially a homogenous group of people and we cannot tell the difference between those who are leaving and those who are staying, until the boat detaches from the harbour. Slowly moving, the boat distances itself from the dock, separating the two groups 'come ad aprire una ferita'² (like a wound cutting open); an amputation after which nothing will be as before. While we can sense the despair and deep tension of the situation, the boat keeps moving away from the land, showing a breach of water underneath. At this moment, the silence

¹ The scene was shot in Buenos Aires and the extras who took part in the scene were all second- or third-generation Italians born in Argentina. This detail was of particular relevance to Crialese who confirmed he really understood the importance, the emotional baggage, and the impact of the Italian diaspora while making that scene. See Paola Bernardini, 'Intervista a Emanuele Crialese: «Nel mio film sogni e illusioni degli emigranti», at http://www.bibliosofia.net/files/bernardini_intervista_a_crialese.htm>. See also Elena Past, 'Lives Aquatic: Mediterranean Cinema and an Ethics of Underwater Existence', in *Cinema Journal*, 48. 3 (2009), 52–65; Andrea Ciliotta-Rubery, 'Machiavelli and the Role of Fortune in Emanuele Crialese's *The Golden Door*', in *The Journal of Political Science*, 38 (2010), 115–40; Margherita Heyer-Caput, 'For a Cinema of Inbetween-ness: Emanuele Crialese's *Nuovomondo*', *Italica*, 90.2 (2013), 272–85.

² Manuel Billi, 'Nuonomondo', review at http://www.spietati.it/z_scheda_dett_film.asp?idFilm=764>.

is abruptly interrupted by the loud sound of the boat's siren; both passengers and onlookers on the dock lift their gaze up at the sky and straight into the camera. The look of the passengers reveals fear for the new adventure, which is about to begin, and for their separation from the old, familiar world. Their look is also a message for us watching them leave: these people are asking us to remember them.

The scene lasts one minute only, but captures the essence of the film in a snapshot of pathos, symbolic of one of the most important moments that marked the history of Italy and its people. The film does not tell the story of Italians in America, as it ends with the arrival of the ship at Ellis Island. Rather, *Nuovomondo* captures the emotional and psychological conditions of those migrants who crossed the ocean to escape poverty in Italy. On the boat to America we can see husbands leaving their wives and children behind; young women forced to separate from their mothers to reach their own husbands, or to be married to a man they had never met before. We can see elderly women embarking on the long journey to rejoin their families who had previously migrated and are now settled in America, as well as newborns – many of whom will not survive the crossing due to the poor hygienic conditions of the vectors.³

The moment of the departure in Crialesse's film, then, beautifully frames the images of void and abyss, which aptly render the experience of emigration, uprootedness, and the emotional and daunting act of separation. We can argue that this scene evokes another traumatic portrayal of fracture, separation, and voyage: the compelling act of the abduction as narrated in the popular myth of Demeter and Persephone.

³ With regard to the sanitary conditions of the sea transports used by migrants during the period of the Great Migration, see Augusta Maolinari, *Le Navi di Lazzaro: Aspetti Sanitari dell'Emigrazione Transoceanica Italiana, il Viaggio per Mare* (Milano: Angeli, 1988).

Before being abducted by Hades, Persephone is in a field, plucking out a narcissus. As soon as Persephone plucks the flower, however:

The earth with its wide ways yawned
 over the Nysian plain; the lord Host-to-Many rose up on her
 ...
 he snatched the unwilling maid into his golden chariot.⁴

Thus, the earth opens wide and swallows the young Persephone (as in *Nuovomondo* the boat leaves, creating a void which becomes wider and wider, separating the Italian migrants from their own motherland). In the film the siren interrupting the silence echoes the moment in which Persephone, after being snatched by Hades, ‘screamed with a shrill voice’.⁵ Hence, the journey to America foregrounds loss, separation (from the maternal womb), and the quest for identity that characterizes the predicament of the immigrants. As the myth of Persephone recounts, and the migrants’ dismayed gaze seems to suggest, the moment of the departure is underpinned by the hope for future reunion:

So long as the goddess gazed on earth and starry heaven,
 on the sea flowing strong and full of fish,
 and on the beams of the sun, she still hoped
 to see her dear mother and the race of immortal gods.⁶

Persephone will, indeed, see her mother again but will also have to eternally travel between the two worlds she now inhabits, the upper and the under worlds. Moreover,

⁴ *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary, and Interpretative Essays*, ed. by Helene P. Foley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 2.

⁵ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, p. 2.

⁶ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, p. 4.

Persephone will have to constantly negotiate and adjust to these two opposing realms; similarly, the Italian migrants will have to balance their old life in the New World. Persephone's myth is, thus, a pervasive story that delicately resonates with the migrants' experience.⁷

During the period of the Great Migration, which started in 1876, around 21 million Italians expatriated – of these, 5,700,000 moved to the United States.⁸ The main protagonists of the Great Migration were southern Italians who, working in farming, were affected by the agricultural crisis that invaded the country at the end of the nineteenth century. Approximately 80% of the Italian migration to the United States was constituted by unskilled labourers; only 0.4% was constituted by the elite class.⁹ The predominant profile of the migrant was that of a young man (aged between 10 and 30);¹⁰ women migrated in a smaller percentage and their cultural condition was usually

⁷ There is an extensive literature that records and studies the Italian mass migration at the turn of the nineteenth century. Here, I will only provide a brief overview of the phenomenon as an historical investigation of Italian migration to America is beyond the main purpose of this thesis. For a deeper study of the Italian migration, see for instance *A Documentary History of the Italian Americans*, ed. by Wayne Moquin with Charles Van Doren (New York: Praeger, 1974); Jerre G. Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of The Italian American Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992); *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana*, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, 2 vols (Roma: Donzelli, 2002); *The Italian American Experience: An Encyclopedia*, ed. by Salvatore LaGumina (New York: Garland, 2000); Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000).

⁸ Giovanni Pizzorusso, 'I Movimenti Migratori in Italia in Antico Regime', in *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana*, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, 2 vols (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), I, 3–14 (p. 3). See also Matteo Sanfilippo, 'Tipologie dell'Emigrazione di Massa', in *Storia dell'Emigrazione Italiana*, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, 2 vols (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), I, 77–94. Although the Great Migration was cemented in the collective history of Italy as an irrepressible event, Italian migration began prior to the Unification of Italy (1861). Starting from the Middle Ages, migration became an intrinsic phenomenon of Italy. Migratory fluxes, in their diverse rhythms and modalities, have characterized different areas of the peninsula throughout the centuries. See Pizzorusso.

⁹ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita* (Bari: Laterza, 1963), p. 55; see also Moquin and Van Doren; Bevilacqua, De Clementi, and Franzina; LaGumina; Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas*.

¹⁰ See for instance in a letter written by Luigi, an Italian migrant who worked as a cobbler in New York, to his family in Italy: 'Mio caro zio [...] se venite voi in America è difficile trovare fatica perché si[ete] passato di età ma se viene Ernesto e Erminio [I giovani cugini di Luigi] appena che vengono trovano fatica'. (Dearest uncle Antonio [...] if you come to America it is difficult to find you a job because you are not young anymore but if Ernesto and Erminio comes [Luigi's young cousins] as soon as they arrive they can find work to do). Franco Ramella, 'Reti Sociali, Famiglie e Strategie Migratorie', in *Storia*

inferior to that of their fathers, brothers, and husbands.¹¹ Although the role of women in the migratory context seems to be less significant compared to that of the men's, as Franco Ramella argues, women still played a major role in making migration a successful experience through their active contribution in helping their husbands to run family businesses,¹² or to work from home taking care of the domestic duties and looking after the family and children, as well as through their political activism.¹³ Moreover, between 1830 and 1920, the European migration to the United States was comprised of nearly one-third women. Nonetheless, these women remain 'absent from histories of immigrant experiences and from scholarship measuring changes that ethnic groups fostered in their adopted country'.¹⁴ Italian women's condition of invisibility has

dell'Emigrazione Italiana, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, 2 vols (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), I, 143–60 (p. 143).

¹¹ De Mauro, p. 55. For a more specific classification of the typology of migrants that accounts for a difference of gender, class, and the distribution among specific working sectors, see De Mauro, p. 54; also Sanfilippo, pp. 81–84.

¹² In 1899, Tommasino, a cobbler who migrated to New York to open a shoe shop there, writes to his wife, Fortuna, to ask her to reach him in America and help him run the business. He writes: 'Cara moglie [...] adesso gli affari sono male [ma] venendo tu alla merica ci mettiamo in pacie a lavorare tutti duve insieme, e tu guatagni trenta e trentacinque lire alla settimana e io lo stesso, e così facciamo la merica, stiamo qualche tembo qua e poi se iddio vuole cene ritornamo in famiglia' (My dearest wife [...] business is not going well at the moment [but] if you come to America the two of us could work together, and you earn thirty and thirty five lire per week and so do I, and we can make America, we can stay here for a while and after that if God helps us we can return to our family). Ramella, p. 153.

¹³ Ramella, p. 151. It is estimated that in the period between 1881 and 1890, only 20.6% of the Italian migration towards the United States was constituted by women; whereas, after 1890, the percentage increased up to 30%. Luigi De Rosa, *Emigranti, Capitali e Banche (1896–1906)*, Edizione del Banco di Napoli (1970), p. 63. See also *International Migrations*, ed. by Walter F. Willcox, vols (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1969), I; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical History of the United States from Colonial Times to the Present* (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census with the cooperation of the Social Science Research Council, 1991). With regard to the relevance of the immigrant Italian women, see also chapter 5 of Richard Gambino, *Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of Italian-Americans* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974); another important and classic study is Leonard Covello, *Social Backgrounds of the Italian American School Child* (Leiden: Brill, 1967). With regard to the role of Italian women and their political role in the American context, see Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the US 1820–1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Jennifer Guglielmo, 'Italian American Women's Political Activism in New York City, 1900–1950', in *The Italians Of New York: Five Centuries of Struggle and Achievement*, ed. by Philip V. Cannistraro (New York: New York Historical Society, 1999), pp. 103–13; Jennifer Guglielmo, 'Italian Women's Proletarian Feminism in the New York City Garment Trades, 1890s–1940s', in *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World*, ed. by Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), pp. 247–98.

¹⁴ Betty Boyd Caroli, 'Italian Women in America: Sources for Study', in *American Woman, Italian Style: Italian-Americana's Best Writings on Women*, ed. by Carol Bonomo Albright and Christine Palamidessi

recently changed. Several works – historical and literary – testifying to their values and contribution in the migratory context have been published.¹⁵ Besides offering an insight into feminine subjectivity, these works show the crucial role of Italian women in keeping ethnicity alive, from one generation to the next.¹⁶ As Donna Gabaccia argues: ‘Women helped make ethnicity an important part of each family’s private little tradition and, thus, ultimately, a component of individual identity into the second and third generations.’¹⁷ Such a process, however, as we can read from the personal stories in the memoirs, poetry, diaries, and novels collected and published in the Italian American literary context, is not without conflict between earlier and later generations of Italian Americans. Torn between the old and the new way of life, Italians embarked on innumerable journeys, at times physical, at times metaphorical, to travel the distance between Italy and America. These are necessary journeys that enabled them to find their

Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 337–48, (p. 337). For a further study of the role of women during the ‘Great Migration’, see Bruna Bianchi, ‘Lavoro ed Emigrazione Femminile (1880–1915), in *Storia dell’Emigrazione Italiana*, ed. by Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, 2 vols (Roma: Donzelli, 2001), I, pp. 257–74.

¹⁵ For a historical perspective, see for instance Corinne Azen Krause, *Grandmothers, Mothers, Daughters: Oral Histories of Three Generations of Ethnic American Women* (Boston: Twayne, 1991); Elizabeth G. Messina, ‘Narratives of Nine Italian American Women: Childhood, Work, and Marriage’, *Italian Americana*, 10.2 (1992), 186–202; see also the works of Donna Rae Gabaccia, Franca Iacovetta, Roslyn Pesman Cooper, Maddalena Tirabassi, Ellie Vasta, in *Altretalia*, issue 9, (January–June 1993); For a literary perspective, see Mary Jo Bona, *The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian/American Women Writers* (Toronto: Guernica Press, 1994); Helen Barolini, *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*, rev. edn with an introduction by Helen Barolini (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000); *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jennifer Gillan, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Edvige Giunta (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); *The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture*, ed. by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta (New York: Feminist Press, 2002); *Our Roots Are Deep With Passion: Creative Nonfiction Collects New Essays by Italian American Writers*, ed. by Lee Gutkind and Joanna Clapps Herman (New York: Other Press, 2006); *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana*, ed. by Carol Bonomo Albright and Joanna Clapps Herman (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); *Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*, ed. by Loretta Baldassar and Donna Gabaccia (New York: Fordham Press, 2010); *Italoamericana: The Literature of the Great Migration, 1880–1943*, ed. by Francesco Durante (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); *Embroidered Stories: Interpreting Women’s Domestic Needlework from the Italian Diaspora*, ed. by Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra (Jackson: The University of Mississippi Press, 2014).

¹⁶ Donna Gabaccia, ‘Italian American Women: A Review Essay’, in *American Woman, Italian Style: Italian-Americana’s Best Writings on Women*, ed. by Carol Bonomo Albright and Christine Palamidessi Moore (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011), pp. 307–32 (p. 315).

¹⁷ ‘Italian American Women’, p. 315.

way to bridge the two worlds and not to succumb to the cultural conflicts that arise each time Italian and American values clash.

This thesis investigates how third-generation Italian American women authors articulate such cultural conflicts and feelings of in-betweenness in their memoirs.¹⁸ Their personal and cultural struggles emerge in their writings as an inheritance from previous generations, and as one which is progressively heightened because of the lack of relevant points of reference with which to understand the experience of the physical and emotional journeys undertaken by their ancestors. Jewish, Black, Native American, and Chicano women, as Helen Barolini explains, for instance, have expressed themselves in literature, thus creating models for other women to understand their experience of coming to terms with and negotiating hybridity in America.¹⁹ On the other hand, the lack of recognition for Italian American literature, especially one including works by female authors, delayed such a process for Italian American women. These authors have, for a long time, lacked a literary arena in which to read and decode

¹⁸ There are currently three different forms to write Italian American: Italian-American, Italian/American, and Italian American. Although the hyphenated form is grammatically correct, it seems to be charged with a negative connotation when it describes a process of identity subtraction that sees the American side prevailing over the Italian one. The Italian/American version was suggested by Anthony Tamburri: 'A final note: on the use of the slash (/) in place of the hyphen (-), I refer to my *To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate*, where I considered, and still do, the use of any diacritical mark in language steeped in ideology in the broadest sense of the terms. It is basically an arbitrary decision that is made according to a systematic set of ideas created by those who have the ability (read, also, power) to do so [...] My reason in maintaining a diacritical mark – the slash – was to bring further light to the fact that a diacritical mark was, as a manner of speaking, *required*.' Anthony J. Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (Re)Cognition of the Italian/American Writer* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), p. ix. See also Anthony J. Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or not Hyphenate. The Italian/American Writer: An "Other" American*, (Toronto: Guernica, 1991). In this thesis, in line with Caterina Romeo, who argues that the lack of any diacritical mark enables both the Italian and the American entity to emerge, without creating binary opposition, I will employ the form 'Italian American'. Caterina Romeo, *Narrative tra due Sponde: Memoir di Italiane d'America* (Roma: Carocci, 2005), p. 13, n. 1. Moreover, as Pellegrino D'Acerno points out, the gap in the form Italian American 'ought to be read as a full sign – not an empty or insignificant blank – that activates and keeps in play all the terminological options discussed above'. *The Italian American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Arts*, ed. by Pellegrino D'Acerno (New York: Garland, 1999), p. xli. At the same time, I too believe that the visual gap in Italian American could be read as symbolic of a gap demanding for a bridge to be built, and ultimately, could be symbolic of the process of becoming and identity construction, investigated in this thesis.

¹⁹ *The Dream Book*, p. 31.

all aspects of the process of a hybrid identity formation that accounts for ‘the transcultural and transgenerational complexities’²⁰ of what it means to be Italian American, as well as being ‘all of that and more’.²¹

This thesis will argue that one of the ways in which it is possible to see how Italian American women appropriate their Italian roots and ancestral past to assert their Italian American identity is linked to the employment of the myth of Persephone in their writings. This thesis looks at how, through the genre of memoir and the practice of writing, these authors rework the myth as a means of female empowerment and ethnic assertion.²² With regard to issues of ethnic and hybrid identity, as well as questions of self-representation through autobiographical writings in the context of Italian American women’s literature, however, it can be argued that the way the myth of Persephone comes into play has not yet been fully examined by literary critics. How does the myth enable Italian American women authors to undertake physical and/or metaphorical journeys in order to explore not only their ethnic and ancestral backgrounds, but also their own approach to gender, race, religion, and generation? And, how is the myth pivotal in bridging individual and collective memory through the writing praxis of memoir? In order to answer these questions and to develop my argument, I will carry

²⁰ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. xiii.

²¹ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. xiii.

²² The first anthologies collecting the works of Italian American authors include Olga Peragallo, *Italian-American Authors and their Contribution to American Literature* (New York: Vanni, 1949). This work presents a list of Italian American authors and was one of the first to bring Italian American literature to the attention of the American literary mainstream. Another pioneering work is Rose Green Basile, *The Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of two Cultures* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1974). Green Basile’s anthology has the merit of being the first anthology to engage with Italian American literature. However, it primarily focuses on male authors. For a perspective on female Italian American literature, see Barolini, *The Dream Book*. Following these works, there are now several anthologies recording the literary production of Italian American authors. For a detailed list see for instance Roseanna Mueller and Dora Labate, ‘A Review of Anthologies for Teaching Italian American Studies’, in *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Giunta Edvige and Kathleen Zamboni McCormick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), pp. 297–306.

out a textual analysis of three Italian American memoirs: Susan Caperna Lloyd's *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992), Kym Ragusa's *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging* (2006), and finally, Joanna Clapps Herman's *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America* (2011). I will explore the way the interplay of myth and memory nestles in the creative writing process enacted by these authors and how it has been pivotal to reconcile the Italian and American values they inherited. On one side, as the works of these authors demonstrate, the myth is often experienced as a connecting gate between Italy and America. On the other side, the myth becomes symbolic of the division between the irreconcilable Italian and American cultures and of the 'shuttling back and forth'²³ between these two spheres of belonging. In addition, as Vera Bushe argues, mythology offers a patriarchal interpretation of the way we organize and understand the world.²⁴ Therefore, the study of mythology is important to gain an insight into the feminine world. A study of mythology, thus, can offer women a way to investigate their female identity, whereas a revision of mythology can show how women react and resist patriarchy. The myth of Persephone in these Italian American women's writings epitomizes the archetype of origin so it becomes a treasure to be sought and rediscovered. The rereading of the plot of this myth is a way to inhabit and rewrite their own Italian and American identities by means of embarking on a metaphorical and/or physical journey in the land of their ancestors. For Italian American women, in particular, Italy seems to be the starting point, the land that needs to be explored and be conquered once for all.

²³ Edvige Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', in *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 33.6 (2004), 767–86 (p. 769) (Italian trans. 'Figlie di Persefone', *DWF – donnawomanfemme: Confini (in)valicabili*, 99 (2013), 73–77.

²⁴ Vera Bushe, 'Cycles of Becoming', in *The Long Journey Home: Re-Visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time*, ed. by Christine Downing (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 173–85 (pp. 173–4).

The three works studied in this thesis contribute to a deeper understanding of the predicament of later generations of Italian Americans and their struggle to fit into American society. As Frank M. Sorrentino argues, second and third generations of Italian Americans found they too often had to negotiate their identity in America. As Sorrentino explains, living in the American context, later generations of Italian Americans could not isolate themselves from educational and economic institutions. Thus, the clash between Italian and American values heightened and ‘created personality conflicts as well as partial estrangement both from their parents and with the larger American society’.²⁵ It can be argued that feelings of anxiety underpinning what being Italian American means could be attributed to a process of ‘historical amnesia’ characterizing the history of Italian Americans.²⁶ These are a people subject to easy stereotypes, the most enduring ones being the association with the *Mafia* and the image of mobsters.²⁷ The identification of Italians with organized crime and with the world of violence and corruption emerging from the media representation still has high currency in the United States and is evidence of what scholars have defined as ‘historical amnesia’ in relation to the Italian American community. This exacerbated stereotype has contributed to obscuring the history of Italian Americans in favour of one that pleases

²⁵ *The Review of Italian American Studies*, ed. by Frank M. Sorrentino and Jerome Krase (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2000), p. 4.

²⁶ Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 17.

²⁷ Alexander DeConde argues that although several investigations have proven that the existence of a *Mafia* in America is a controversial subject, however, writers, politicians, and law officers claim it does exist and is made up of Italians, ‘a loose establishment of criminals who behave in a particular way following general rules of conduct of their own’. Alexander DeConde, *Half Bitter, Half Sweet: An Excursion into Italian-American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), p. 345. For a study of the concept of organized crime, and how it evolved and developed in America, see Michael D. Lyman and Gary W. Potter, *Organized Crime*, 6th edn (Boston: Prentice Hall, 2014). This work examines the many aspects of organized crime in America and casts doubt on the assumption that Italian Americans, often subject to the stereotype of *Mafioso* by the media, were the only people connected to criminality. For a study on the construction of gender, race, and ethnicity in Italian American studies through the image of the gangster see also Fred L. Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

and best accommodates contemporary American society.²⁸ This ‘historical amnesia’, which does not value the lives of Italian migrants in America, has made it hard for Italian Americans of later generations to understand why Italy was so important for their forebears. Consequently, it was highly difficult for these generations to develop and maintain connectedness with Italy and its cultural values. The three texts examined in this thesis – with their stylistic, structural, and thematic similarities and differences – portray the conflicts originating from the in-between position occupied by the authors, as exemplified by Sorrentino’s words.

Although all refer to the myth of Persephone, the three memoirs present interesting differences. Firstly, the authors adopt different categories of memoir. While Caperna Lloyd’s book is a travel memoir and Clapps Herman’s work is a family memoir, Ragusa’s text inhabits an in-between space, drawing on aspects of both the travel and the family memoir. The family narrative composed by Ragusa in *The Skin between Us* is framed in the prologue and epilogue in which the author writes about her journey to Sicily. Another difference concerns the way the myth is resurrected, rediscovered, and called upon by the three authors. Whether it represents a physical quest or a metaphorical journey of self-discovery, we will see that the myth of Persephone rises and is incorporated into these narratives in particular ways that make these memoirs different from each other.

Through a critical framework coming across as a blend between psychoanalysis, feminist and postcolonial criticism, I will argue that these three texts show how the authors’ physical and/or psychological journeys between Italy and America have helped them to overcome the anxieties experienced in relation to their Italian American hybrid

²⁸ See Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 22.

identity. Such an approach allows us to investigate the myth – the only tale from Mediterranean civilization told entirely from a woman’s point of view – as a crucial narrative enabling these hybrid authors to rethink women’s life stories and the mother-daughter bond. I will, thus, pay attention to (re)interpretations of female development and questions of identity and power, liminality, ethnicity, race, and hybridity. These notions, as developed in the works of Adriana Cavarero, Adrienne Rich, Stuart Hall, Jeffrey Weeks, Michael M.J Fischer, Victor Turner, and Homi K. Bhabha, will be of use to understand how the myth comes into play to unearth the fractures originating from the trauma of loss, separation, and reunion, as well as how it has helped the authors to write about their condition of in-betweenness and dwellers of the *limen*.²⁹

Cavarero argues that

... the natural/natal order of gazes [...] demands that we look at the female gender in relationships between mothers and children. Every woman belongs to this gender, and finds in this gaze the measure of her own appearance and being in the world.³⁰

As this quote suggests, then, the relationship between mother and child lies at the core of the process of identity formation and more specifically of a female identity. Throughout the textual analyses provided in this thesis, I will look at the elision of the mother figure and the devastating consequences of the interruption of ‘natural/natal

²⁹ Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Norton, 1976); Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), pp. 222–37; Stuart Hall, ‘Culture, Community, Nation’, *Cultural Studies*, 7.3 (1993), 349–63; Jeffrey Weeks, ‘The Value of Difference’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 88–100; Victor Turner, ‘Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*’, in Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), pp. 46–55; Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Michael M. J. Fischer, ‘Ethnicity as Text and Model’, in *Anthropology as Cultural Critique: An Experimental Moment in the Human Sciences*, ed. by George E. Marcus and Michael M. J. Fischer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 174–75, (p. 176); Stuart Hall, ‘The New Ethnicities’, in *Ethnicity*, ed. by John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 161–63, (pp. 161–62); *The Invention of Ethnicity*, ed. by Werner Sollors (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

³⁰ Cavarero, p.62.

order of gazes'. The reinterpretation of a classical text such as the story of the myth of Persephone – an act Rich defines as 're-vision'³¹ – carried out by the authors allows them to weave life narratives that refuse to accept absolutist forms of cultural identity and question a set of preconceived notions.

Ethnicity, when defined as a construct originating from cultural, historical, and political paradigms of difference is negatively charged. However, it is possible to subvert this perspective. Ethnicity, Fischer argues, is 'a process of interference between two or more cultural traditions' that produces 'dynamic mechanisms of intercultural knowledge' which 'provide reservoirs for renewing humane values'.³² In a similar fashion, Sollors comes to see and define ethnicity 'not ... a static, permanent or 'pure' thing but ... the result of interactions'.³³ These definitions contend that, although ethnicity is constructed, it is indeed revealing of the historical, linguistic, and cultural aspects that contribute to trace and define ethnicity. Therefore, as Hall suggests, the term can and must be appropriated by those subjects who are looking for an instrument of self-representation in which it is possible to articulate subjectivity and identity.³⁴ This is highly important when analysing the idea of ethnicity surfacing from Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman's memoirs as these notions of ethnicity challenge its negative meaning and urge us to rethink both ethnicity and paradigms of difference. This process of ethnic appropriation that accounts for self-expression and identity definition can take place in a hybrid region that Bhabha defines as 'third space'. Bhabha interprets hybridity as a 'third space' in which hybrid subjects empower themselves and

³¹ Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Sex, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 35.

³² Fischer, 'Ethnicity as Text and Model', p. 176.

³³ Sollors, p. xix.

³⁴ Hall, 'The New Ethnicities', pp. 161–62.

emerge from the liminal position they occupy.³⁵ On the other hand, Hall and Weeks define identity as something in motion that has to present answers to the modern times. According to Hall, in order to be productive, identification constantly has to exist in a state of continuous movement and change.³⁶ As I will argue, by incorporating and rewriting Persephone — goddess of the *limen* par excellence — these authors turn to the myth as an expression for their hybridity, and cultural and ethnic appropriation, as well as a mode of resistance against the fragmentation of their selves.

The myth of Persephone

Persephone, or Proserpine in the Latin tradition, was also called Kore (maiden) during her youth. She was the beautiful daughter of Demeter, goddess of the harvest and fertility. Persephone's story takes place in the city of Enna, in the Sicilian hinterland. According to the myth, on a summer morning, Persephone was playing with the nymphs in the meadows. Attracted by a rare flower, a beautiful narcissus she had never seen before, she went to pluck it. Suddenly, the earth opened below her feet. Hades, her uncle and god of the Underworld, came out from the breach and, pitiless towards Persephone's screams, forced her onto his golden chariot and abducted her to the Underworld. There, he raped her and made her his wife and Queen of the Dead.

³⁵ The notion of 'third space' was postulated by Bhabha in the context of the British colonial empire in India. There are, therefore, significant historical and cultural differences between the time when the notion of 'third space' was introduced and the way I am employing it for the scope of this thesis. Here, I will focus on 'the process of cultural hybridity' that 'gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation'. Jonathan Rutherford, 'Interview with Homi Bhabha', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), pp. 207-21, (p. 211).

³⁶ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 222.

Hekate, goddess of the moon, ghosts, and witches and a dread fury in the Underworld, heard Persephone's screams, but only Helios, god of the sun who dwells in the skies, witnessed the abduction. He did not reveal Hades' identity to Demeter. Shattered by her daughter's disappearance, Demeter wandered the earth for nine days in search of her beloved Persephone who was nowhere to be found. On the tenth day Hekate joined Demeter in her desperate search and together they wandered, holding torches. Moved by Demeter's pain, Helios confessed to Demeter that Hades had abducted Persephone upon Zeus' consent. Demeter's wrath grew immeasurable. Both Zeus and Helios tried to comfort her and, in vain, to convince her that Persephone's was, after all, a powerful and appropriate marriage. Demeter left the gods of Mount Olympus and refused to come back until Persephone was released. Angry at the Sicilian island that devoured her daughter, Demeter refused to let the crops grow, leaving the whole land barren and infertile.

While wandering the earth, the goddess, disguised as an old woman, stopped at a well at the Greek city of Eleusis, governed by Keleo. While the king's daughters were heading towards the well, they noticed the old woman and brought her home to meet their mother, Metaneira. As soon as the queen saw her, she was awed by her and offered her a stool covered by a woollen cloth, where Demeter sat, in silence. She refused to eat and drink and she never smiled until the maid Iambe performed funny jokes and made her laugh. Demeter stayed at Keleo's house and took care of Demophoon, Keleo and Metaneira's son. To reciprocate the hospitality received, she decided to make Demophoon a god and every night, behind his parents' back, Demeter would immerse him in the flames. But one night, Metaneira, spying on her, saw the old woman holding her baby over the fires and screamed. The old woman revealed her real identity and,

furious at the queen, ordered that people of Eleusis build a temple in Demeter's honour. The goddess waited and mourned Persephone in that temple. In the meantime, Zeus could not ignore that Sicily was devastated by Demeter's action. Therefore, the father of the gods asked Hades to return Persephone to her mother. Hades agreed, but before letting Persephone go, he tricked her and forced her to eat the seeds of a pomegranate, thus dooming her to return to his kingdom of darkness. In fact, according to the rules of the world of the dead, he who eats the seeds of a pomegranate is not allowed to leave the Underworld. After greeting her daughter with immense joy, Demeter asked her if she had had any food while captive in the Underworld. Persephone admitted she was forced to eat the seeds of a pomegranate. Thus, Demeter would not give up and kept her curse over Sicily. To avoid the complete destruction of the island, Zeus intervened in the dispute and ordered that Persephone live half of the year in the Underworld next to her husband, Hades, and the other half on the earth, next to her mother.

Traditionally, this myth has been used and told to explain the cycle of the seasons. In fact, while Persephone lives in the Underworld, nothing grows on earth as a sign of Demeter's pain, and this is the time of the year corresponding to the periods of autumn and winter. On the other hand, while Persephone lives on the earth next to her mother, the whole earth rejoices and grows fertile, and this time corresponds to the seasons of spring and summer.³⁷

Dense with significance and power of suggestion, the myth of Persephone has inspired many artists in the figurative and performing arts, as well as in the literary world. Narrations and representations of the myth refer to the classical sources, from

³⁷ This plot of the myth draws information from *Classical Mythology*, ed. by Mark P. O. Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, 7th edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 307–27. See also Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*; Jennifer R. March, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Havertown: Oxbow Books, 2014), p. 1131; *A Companion to Greek Mythology*, ed. by Ken Dowden and Niall Livingstone (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Limited, 2013), pp. 83–4.

Hesiod, to Homer, Ovid, and Claudian. The first depiction of the myth of Persephone is in Hesiod's *Theogony*. However, because Hesiod tells the myth in only a few lines, scholars tend to refer to the Homeric *Hymns to Demeter* as the oldest source.³⁸ Another authoritative source is provided by Ovid in his *Fasti*, and subsequently in his *Metamorphosys*. A third classical source is Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae (Rape of Proserpine)*.³⁹ These versions of the myth are similar in the core structure, but differ in the choice of some of the features that frame it.⁴⁰ This proves how, since its early stages, the myth has been subject to constant revisions.

At the beginning of *Classical Myth*, Barry B. Powell, quoting Sir James Frazer, writes:

The longer I occupy myself with questions of ancient mythology, the more diffident I become of success in dealing with them, and I am apt to think that we who spend our years in searching for solutions to these insoluble problems are like Sisyphus perpetually rolling his stone uphill only to see it revolve again into the valley.⁴¹

As Frazer's statement seems to suggest, mythology is a very controversial issue. In most of the cases, when we deal with this subject we will be presented with different versions of the same myth and it is not always possible to date the story back to its real origins. But what is myth, precisely? In *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, Károly

³⁸ Federica Mazzara, 'Persephone: Her Mythical Return to Sicily', in *Arco Journal*, e-journal of the Università degli Studi di Palermo, online at www.arcojournal.unipa.it/pdf/mazzara_24_11_03.pdf [accessed 2 March 2012].

³⁹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, 912–14; Ovid, *The Fasti*, IV, vv. 389–620; Ovid, *The Metamorphosys*, V, vv. 341–571; Claudian, *The Rape of Proserpine*, I, vv. 235–245.

⁴⁰ Three of the main features that differentiate the classical sources are the setting of the myth, the reason that triggers the abduction, and the way Persephone eats the seeds of the pomegranate. For a further study on the comparison of these three classical sources, see Mazzara. For a study of the setting of the myth, see also Giuseppe Martorana, *Il Riso di Demetra: Dee, Eroi e Santi di Sicilia* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1985).

⁴¹ Barry B. Powell, *Classical Myth*, 8th edn with translations by Herbert M. Howe (Boston: Pearson, 2015), p. 1.

Kerényi says that ‘the word ‘myth’ is altogether too equivocal, blunted, and hazy’.⁴² As Powell points out, ‘a definition widely agreed on is that myth is a traditional story with collective importance’.⁴³ By analysing the etymology of the word, Powell argues that *muthos* originally meant ‘authoritative speech’, ‘story’, or ‘plot’.⁴⁴ Also, Adrian Cunningham in his *Theory of Myth* says that *muthos* indicates ‘speech’ or ‘story’ but he also highlights that *muthos* cannot be distinguished from the *logos* and that both words came to designate ‘stories’.⁴⁵ But what kind of story does myth tell us? Cunningham argues that ‘in the fifth century *muthos* (as opposed to *logos*) begins to be applied more specifically to stories whose truth is less vouched for’.⁴⁶ Powell, instead, claims that ‘myth is a certain kind of story that we describe as traditional’ and “‘handed over” orally from one storyteller to another without the intervention of writing’.⁴⁷ Because these stories served to pass down, from one generation to the next, the knowledge and the understanding of the way society organizes the world, myths play a leading role in connecting the past and the present, the old and the new. Therefore, as Powell argues, myths ‘explain a society to itself, promulgating its concerns and values. From this function derives myth’s “collective importance” – myths hold meaning for the group, not just for members of a society, especially in times of crisis’.⁴⁸

By telling and passing on the story of a myth, then, we ensure its survival and contribute to keeping its memory alive. Such memory, in turn, will constitute the

⁴² Carl Gustav Jung and Károly Kerényi, *Introduction to a Science of Mythology: The Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, trans. by Hull R. F. C. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 2.

⁴³ Powell, p. 2.

⁴⁴ Powell, p. 2.

⁴⁵ *The Theory of Myth: Six Studies*, ed. by Adrian Cunningham (London: Sheed and Ward, 1973), pp. 13–14.

⁴⁶ Cunningham, p. 13.

⁴⁷ Powell, p. 2.

⁴⁸ Powell, p. 3.

ground that nourishes our roots and origins. The stories that are passed down are like seeds planted in the ground to bring into being robust trees we can lean on when ‘times of crisis’ arise. These stories constitute important points of reference, showing us how to return home when we feel we have lost the way.⁴⁹ Moving from orality to writing, then, the myth of Persephone has been revisited by many.

Roberto Deidier’s critical work, *Persefone: Variazioni sul Mito* (2010) is one of the most recent works on the representation of Persephone and Demeter in both classical and modern models by Western male artists.⁵⁰ After analysing the classical sources, he moves on to modern works: *Proserpina* by Gianbattista Marino, *Proserpina* by Goethe, *Il Giardino di Proserpina* by Swinburne, *Demetra e Persefone* by Tennyson, and, finally, the theatrical representation *Persephone* by Ghiannis Ritsos.

In his critical analysis, Deidier brings to the fore Persephone’s doubles. In the beginning of the myth, the most dominant attribute assigned to Persephone is that of *levitas*. She is a maiden, Kore, light and naïve in both the way she plays with her friends and the way she is attracted to the narcissus she saw for the first time. In

⁴⁹ In the passing down from one generation to the next, however, it is likely that in the telling and retelling of a story a few details might change or be lost. How, then, can we be sure of its truth and reliability? As mentioned, although several versions of the myth of Demeter and Persephone exist, we have noted that the core story has remained unchanged. With regard to this, in her PhD dissertation about the employment of the myth of Persephone in Victorian literature, Ann Brian Murphy reports an interesting anecdote. She writes: ‘A university professor teaching a course in the oral tradition devised the following experiment. He recorded an ancient legend on a tape recorder. He then had each student in his class meet with him individually. The first student listened to the tape recording the original legend, and then retold that story on the tape. The second student then listened to the first student’s versions of the story, and retold her understanding of it on a tape, and so on. Each student listened only to the previous student’s version of the legend, and then retold the story for the next student to hear.

At some point in this process, one student omitted a crucial element in the narrative. But within three students’ retelling of the tale, that element had been re-invented and re-inserted into the story. In other words, the element was so basic to the narrative that it simply had to be there; subsequent tellers of the legend, with no prior knowledge of the story’s missing element, rediscovered/invented it because the narrative required it.’ See Ann Brian Murphy, ‘Persephone in the Underworld: the Motherless Hero in Novels by Burney, Radcliffe, Austen, Bronte, Eliot, and Woolf: Feminist Criticism, Psychoanalytical Criticism, Archetypal Criticism’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Massachusetts, 1986), p. xviii.

⁵⁰ Roberto Deidier, *Persefone: Variazioni sul Mito* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010).

contrast with the connotation of *levitas* is the goddess's fate, which she carries in her very same name: *phero-phonos*, 'she who brings destruction'. The alternation of the double is a dominant characteristic of this goddess. She will always be Kore/Persephone, divided by light and darkness, life and death, dweller of both the earth and the Underworld. All of these images are linked by the perspective that, paraphrasing Deidier, Persephone is a deity of the *limen*, the threshold.

In the figurative arts, Persephone is often represented as a victim during the act of the abduction. For instance, in the famous sculpture by Bernini, Hades is holding her while Persephone is reaching: one arm on the head of her abductor and the other one stretching out towards the sky in search of help. Filarete has portrayed the scene of the abduction on the bronze doors of St Peter's in Rome. Among the painters, it is possible to number Pinturicchio, Leonardo, Paolo Veronese, Rubens, Rembrandt, Artemisia Gentileschi, Tiepolo, and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, just to name a few.⁵¹

With regard to literature, important works examining the employment of the myth of Persephone in literary works, and which also account for a female perspective, include Elizabeth T. Hayes' *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature* (1994) and Margot K. Louis' *Persephone Rises, 1860–1927: Mythography, Gender, and the creation of a New Spirituality* (2009).⁵² Hayes' book has the merit of being the first one to collect essays from different scholars exploring the employment of the myth of Persephone in works by Chaucer, Shakespeare, Quinault and Lully, Hawthorne, Atherton, D.H. Lawrence, Beckett, Atwood, Cixous, and Morrison, Hurston, and Walker. Using an intertextual approach, it is also the first book that offers

⁵¹ Deidier, p. 12.

⁵² Margot K. Louis, *Persephone Rises, 1860–1927: Mythography, Gender and the Creation of a New Spirituality* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), p. xii; *Images of Persephone: Feminist Readings in Western Literature*, ed. by Elizabeth T. Hayes (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994).

a feminist and cultural insight into the myth as a way to bring to the fore issues of gender as related to contemporary society. *Images of Persephone* thus explores women's life experiences within patriarchal paradigms, as inspired by the myth.

Louis' book is an investigation of the way the myth of Persephone was perceived and incorporated by both male and female authors in Victorian and early Modernist literature. Louis argues that the myth of Persephone pervades this literature and seems to have acquired different meanings according to the phases the myth underwent. Therefore, she shows the shift from the vision of Persephone as the eternal child to the 'embodiment of the maturing mind of humanity'.⁵³ Louis investigates the way the myth epitomizes the idea of marriage as a patriarchal institution and one that does not foster a healthy relationship between mother and daughter. In addition, Louis argues that we can read Persephone's experience in the underworld as a revealing one for the young goddess. By living there, that is, away from the mother, Persephone gains individuality while becoming 'more and more hostile to her mother's optimistic and perhaps naïve vision of life'.⁵⁴ Louis's work shows how the myth of Persephone moves on two opposing trajectories: one pulls 'toward a sardonic assessment of woman's tragic entrapment in a society dominated by male institutions', whereas the other one pulls 'toward a joyous vision of reunion after alienation'.⁵⁵

⁵³ Louis, p. xii.

⁵⁴ Louis, p. xiii.

⁵⁵ Louis, p. 25.

Re-visioning Persephone in Italian American women's works

With regard to Italian American literature it is possible to see how the myth or patterns of mythical allusion have made their way in particular through the writings and figurative arts of Italian American women authors. Two of the main critical works examining the myth of Demeter and Persephone in Italian American women's writings are *Persephone Goes Home: Italian American Women in Italy* (2003) by Alison D. Goeller, and *Persephone's Daughters* (2004) by Edvige Giunta.⁵⁶ Although addressing issues of gender, Giunta and Goeller's works differ from the ones previously reviewed as *Persephone Goes Home* and *Persephone's Daughters* also examine the way Italian American women authors turn to the image of Persephone to describe and negotiate their Italian American identity and the cultural conflicts underpinning their condition of subject in-between two cultures. These works shed light on how mythical patterns can function within the context of Italian American literary texts written by women. To look at the employment of the myth is pivotal in order to understand how a text, leveraging mythology, 'participates in its culture's discourse on the significance of myth in general, and the meaning and usefulness of that particular myth'.⁵⁷ Giunta's and Goeller's works take invaluable steps towards the understanding of the employment of the myth of Persephone in Italian American female literature. However, they do not specifically investigate the interplay between myth and memory and the shifting from the oral to the written space. Only Giunta's essay briefly refers to the myth as a way to historicize the Italian American migration experience.

⁵⁶ Alison D. Goeller, 'Persephone Goes Home: Italian American Women in Italy', *MELUS*, 28 (2003), 73–90; Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', pp. 767–86.

⁵⁷ Louis, p. xi.

In the first part of her work, Goeller claims that, only starting from the eighties, Italian American women have begun to assert their hybrid identity and to impose themselves on both the American literary mainstream and readers. In order to explain this late blooming or lack of acknowledgement, Goeller refers to Carol Bonomo Albright Ahern's view of the process of acculturation. According to the scholar, as Goeller writes, it is possible to divide such a process into four stages. The first one is the immigrant stage in which hope for a better future is the main feature. The second one is characterized by shame and poverty and therefore the downplaying of Italian roots. The third stage is that of confusion. Americans of Italian descent find it strenuous to balance the American values they live in and the Italian values they inherited. Finally, the fourth stage is that of reconciliation. This phase is usually the most creative one. Italian American writers and artists look at their Italian past and baggage and draw on it to level and ease the conflicts which arise from the clash of values.⁵⁸

Although each stage identifies a specific Italian American generation with its peculiarities, generational differences are not always fixed and 'generational identity is a matter of potentiality'.⁵⁹ Hence, it might happen that a third generation Italian American author, usually placed in the fourth stage of reconciliation, could be instead positioned in the stage of confusion (the third stage, which normally identifies Italian Americans of second generation). As Goeller writes:

[...] for many Italian Americans, role of confusion, though very often a third generation phenomenon, does sometimes exist well beyond the second and even the third generation. Such cultural confusion and tension, a source of creativity and inspiration for the ethnic writer, is heightened for Italian American women because of the added tensions inherent in their traditionally assigned female roles.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Goeller, pp. 73–74.

⁵⁹ Goeller, p. 77.

⁶⁰ Goeller, p. 74.

As this quote seems to suggest, Italian American women have always been fixed in the roles assigned to them by the patriarchal society they live in. According to this stereotype, Italian American women are expected to lead a domestic life, raise their children, and always be present to infuse the sense of security inherent in the values of the tradition they embody. For instance, travelling, especially by herself and without a male companion, was not an option for an Italian American woman. Starting from this consideration, Goeller's article analyses both fiction and non-fiction writings by Italian American women authors, linked by the theme of travel. The travel, then, is associated with Persephone's condition of having to live in a perennial state of movement: doomed to journey every six months from hell to earth to join her mother, and from earth to hell to join her husband. The sort of travel these writers embark on, as analysed by Goeller, is a travel back to their ancestors' homeland. Goeller pools them all together around the image of Persephone, the forerunner of both the traveller and the migrant, she who is doomed to travel back and forth from one world to another. In her conclusion, the scholar points out that 'whether second, third, or fourth generation, travelling to Italy represents, finally, for them a personal affirmation of their hyphenated identity, though that affirmation comes in different and sometimes difficult forms and is never without contradictions'.⁶¹ Whether incorporated in Italian American women's literary works or not, then, the myth of Demeter and Persephone has been used by Goeller to analyse how these writers, at the end of their travels, managed to build a bridge between the opposing poles of their identity.

⁶¹ Goeller, p. 78.

In *Persephone's Daughters*, Giunta aims to prove that even though Italian American women had to migrate to the United States, they never forgot their roots. This sense of belonging emerges when these women portray the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their works. This is proof that 'Italian American women carry Persephone's story as part of their cultural baggage'.⁶² To understand this deep connection, Giunta, herself an Italian American woman of first generation, had to go back to Sicily and visit the Greek sites there. As she writes, 'embarking on this search is a form of homecoming'.⁶³ Further to a sense of affiliation with these women, Giunta's work was triggered by Barolini's position, according to which Italian American women have always written without a literary tradition to support them. If, on the one hand, Giunta agrees with this position, on the other hand, she has come to enrich the debate by claiming that:

Italian American women draw from a rich, though often unexamined, even unacknowledged, cultural past, for most of the early immigrants who came to the United States came from Southern Italy, the heart of Magna Grecia, and though few if any carried a university degree, they all brought with them, albeit unwittingly, the myth of Magna Grecia. This cultural heritage has made its way, covertly and overtly, into Italian American literature and art.⁶⁴

Starting from Caperna Lloyd's *No Pictures in My Grave*, in which the myth is the lifeblood of the narrative and the kernel of Caperna Lloyd's journey to Sicily, Giunta analyses other works by Italian American artists in which the myth is either present or can be (re)interpreted somehow. Ranging from novels, poems, documentaries and figurative arts, *Persephone's Daughters* offers an overview of the several different

⁶² Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', p. 769.

⁶³ Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', p. 770.

⁶⁴ Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', p. 774.

meanings the Greek myth embodies for Italian American women. An interesting example among the figurative arts is, for instance, represented by Nancy Azara. In Azara's works it is possible to read the myth as related to the feminine body. Largely drawing on her southern Italian heritage to mould her art, Azara represents the feminine body 'in relation to the spiritual and to interrogate the sense of a "gender-based spiritual dissonance"'.⁶⁵ Her sculpture *Spirit House of the Mother* reproduces a sacred place and reminds us of the temple where the Eleusinian Mysteries were enacted.⁶⁶ The presence of the colour red permeates the sculpture. This colour is associated with the world of the dead. As Deidier pointed out, it was Claudian who made red the colour of the Underworld. In *The Odyssey*, Homer tells us that when Odysseus had to descend into the underworld, he was instructed to go through Persephone's black forest, where he had to sail his ship next to the poplars and willows whose fruits never mature. The image of a sterile forest, ruled by darkness, death, and fixity is reversed by Claudian's verses. The poet writes of a dark forest lit by a tree – consecrated to Persephone – which will always bear red fruits. The pomegranate becomes the symbol of change and movement. Persephone, then, is identified with the red pomegranate, the fruit which will always mature, and is also connected to the movement of life that mirrors the

⁶⁵ Flavia Rando, "'My Mother Was a Strong Woman": Respect, Shame, and the Feminine Body in the Sculpture of Nancy Azara and Antonette Rosato', in *Voices in Italian Americana*, ed. by Edvige Giunta (Special Issue in Italian American Women, 7.2 (1996)), pp. 225–29 (pp. 227–28).

⁶⁶ Here is a description as reported by Rando: 'Painted in reds and gold-leaf, Spirit House of the Mother reveals the exuberant extravagance of deep faith – the bleeding (of the body), and the radiance (of the spirit), that summons and praises the divine. As one approaches it, winding around its formidable solidity, The Mother's House conveys a warning. The exterior, embellished with ancient gold layered over green, its energy directed outward towards the approaching viewer, is incandescent with the power of the blood-red interior. Once there was a forbidding gate at the entrance, and although it is now gone, one must still step over a threshold that acts as both barrier and invitation. Sentinels flanking the entrance guard the interior, but even they are marked, blood-red flames seeping from their sutured wounds.' Rando, pp. 27–8.

natural cycle of the *physis*, nature. In this sense we can see how the colour red has come to identify the world of the dead.⁶⁷



Figure 1 - *Spirit House of the Mother*, Nancy Azara (1995)

The contrast of the exterior gold and the interior red in *The Mother's House* reminds us of the pomegranate itself in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, when Persephone breaks it in half and one can glimpse the inside of the fruit. It is 'red, gravid with its

⁶⁷ Drawing on Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths*, Deidier claims that the pomegranate can be linked to more ancient oriental cults: 'A taboo rested on red-coloured food, which might be offered to the dead only; and the pomegranate was supposed to have sprung – like eight-petalled scarlet anemone – from the blood of Adonis, or Tammuz. The seven pomegranate seeds represent, perhaps, the seven phases of the moon during which farmers wait for the green corn-shoots to appear. But Persephone eating the pomegranate is originally Sheol, the goddess of Hell, devouring Tammuz; while Ishtar (Sheol herself in a different guise) weeps to placate his ghost. Hera, as a former Death-goddess, also held a pomegranate.' Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 2 vols, (London: Penguin, 1995), I, p. 24. See also Deidier, pp. 17-8.

seeds like the womb of a woman'.⁶⁸ At once, it is the symbol of death and fertility.⁶⁹ If *The Mother's House* can be interpreted as the temple of the Mysteries where he who enters embarks on a deep initiation, Azara's *The Goddess Wall* is a clear allusion to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. This sculpture of wooden panels, towering upwards, is a tribute to the Greek myth, which is rooted in Azara's Sicilian heritage. This work of art is a hymn to the feminine power suggested by the story of the goddesses. Divided in half, at the bottom it represents the world of darkness, while at the top, the world of light. At the centre of the sculpture, the hand of a woman is rising from the bottom and holding a red fruit, symbol of victory. As mentioned, in most of the figurative arts, Persephone is represented when the abduction takes place; the goddess's face is a portrait of fear and pain. In Azara's *The Goddess Wall*, however, it is not victimization that pervades the scene; rather, it is victory that is represented, the rebirth of Persephone, who will always survive the winter, the darkness, and will win the flowing of time. She is the Queen.

In the conclusion to *Persephone's Daughters*, Giunta claims that two of the main works about the myth of Persephone, both published in 1994, are *Images of Persephone*

⁶⁸ Ignazio E. Buttitta, *I Morti e il Grano: Tempi del Lavoro e Ritmi della Festa* (Roma: Meltemi), p. 96.

⁶⁹ Here is a description of the interior of Azara's sculpture by Rando: 'The interior of The Mother's House opens in prayerful supplication. Even the ground we walk upon is carved. Spiralling, it contains and returns the energy of a shimmering, opalescent core set in the midst of an aged and darkened red: beauty emerges from (the remains of) trauma. Following the footstep-like hollows in order to approach the core becomes an initiation, a path through a labyrinth to a destination within the self. The core is joined to its matrix with frankly revealed dowels. For Azara these dowels, visible only at the pearl-like core, marking both the violence of transformation and the tenderness of attachment, symbolize the process of restoring 'that which has been lost/taken'. The core is carved with tender hollows. Rose/pink pigments have been rubbed into each chiselled indentation, bluish veins carry the deep matted lines of blood. Even as Azara houses her own spirit in these sculptures, the viewer is courted, made aware of vulnerability, and then sheltered. The Mother's House is open to the sky: once within, we are bathed in light.' Rando, p. 28.

by Hayes and *The Long Journey Home*, a collection of essays by Christine Downing.⁷⁰

Giunta notices how these works (and we can add Louis's too):

[...] do not make any mention of the Mediterranean origins; they do not mention, that is, the groups that can claim a direct cultural connection to the myth. It is not that Italian American women (or Greek American women, for that matter) do not write about Persephone; they do. But their work has for a long time lacked the kind of cultural visibility and recognition that would make it possible for their names to appear in studies such as these.⁷¹

In line with Giunta's argument advocating for stronger attention to be paid to the works produced by Italian American writers and artists, other critics, such as Helen Barolini, Mary Jo Bona, Fred L. Gardaphé, Anthony J. Tamburri, Robert Viscusi, Joseph Sciorra, George Guida, Caterina Romeo, and Francesco Durante (just to name a few) have highlighted such lacunae, and contributed to bring into the light the literary production of Italian American authors.⁷² In particular, in her *Narrative tra due Sponde*, Italian critic Romeo has investigated how Italian American women have appropriated the literary genre of memoir. The merit of this work is that it shows how these women have turned to memoir as a mode of resistance against the moral and social constraints that

⁷⁰ Hayes; Christine Downing, *The Goddess: Mythological Images of the Feminine* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

⁷¹ Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters', pp. 781–82. See also Louis.

⁷² See for instance, Tamburri, *To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate*; Fred L. Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*; D'acerno; Mary Jo Bona, *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Mary Ann Mannino, *Revisionary Identities: Strategies of Empowerment in the Writings of Italian American Woman* (New York: Lang, 2000); Edvige Giunta, *Writing with an Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women's Writing*, ed. by Mary Ann Mannino and Justin Vitiello (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2003); George Guida, *The Peasant and the Pen: Men, Enterprise, and the Recovery of Culture in Italian American Narrative* (New York: Lang, 2003); Fred L. Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy: Essaying Italian American Literature* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004); Durante. For a further study on the evolution of Italian American literary studies, see Robert Viscusi, 'The History of Italian American Literary Studies', in *Teaching Italian American Literature, Film, and Popular Culture*, ed. by Giunta Edvige and Kathleen Zamboni McCormick (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2010), pp. 43–58.

confined them to marginal and liminal positions in relation to their Italian community of belonging, as well as to the Anglo-American mainstream. Through the practice of memoir writing, Italian American women authors have found a way to denounce the status quo of the patriarchal community in which they grew up and to articulate the way they negotiated their relationship with their ancestral roots.⁷³

Italian American women authors draw on their rich cultural past embedded in myths and collective memory to speak about their life experiences. These myths emerge from the practices of storytelling which characterize Italian American culture. As Fred L. Gardaphé argues, the history of Italian Americans relies mainly on orality as it was ‘passed on from one generation to the next by word of mouth’.⁷⁴ Because Italian American history hinges on orality, then ‘silence becomes an organizing principle by which some realities can be entirely eliminated from cultural memory’.⁷⁵ In this sense, we can argue that by choosing not only to explore their ethnic roots, but to write about it, Italian American women go against the silence enshrouding the history of Italian Americans; at the same time, by so doing, they ensure the survival of their families’ pasts. In the principle of silence, then, we can understand the political act of reworking the image of Persephone as a victim. The goddess, indeed, becomes representative of Italian American women’s life experience because the young maiden, although being the protagonist of the myth, is often neglected. Not much is told about Persephone; rather the story focuses on Demeter’s quest and revolves around matters of power. Thus, Persephone epitomizes Italian American women in their condition of liminality and silence. If ‘myths [...] are histories that over the years become stories

⁷³ Romeo, *Narrative tra Due Sponde*.

⁷⁴ Fred L. Gardaphé, ‘The Italians and the ‘Mericans: Myths and Metaphors of Becoming American’, in *Merica: A Conference on the Culture and Literature of Italians in North America*, ed. by Aldo Bove and Giuseppe Massara (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 2006), pp. 65–83 (p. 65).

⁷⁵ Gardaphé, ‘The Italians and the ‘Mericans’, p. 65.

that change as the need for different lessons arises in each generation',⁷⁶ we can see that these women turn to Persephone and rewrite this myth in order to resist the notion of an immobile past. By means of writing their stories, they enact an irreversible process that makes the past future-oriented. Through their narratives Italian American women grapple with the ambiguities and contradictions that marked their growing up and adult life as Italian American in a world where the stereotypes of Italian Mafia, buffoons, and *The Godfather* are still very much alive today. Through the descent into the realm of memory, initially perceived as a realm of darkness and of the unknown, Italian American women understand that 'you cannot work with light unless you are willing to uncover the pain'.⁷⁷ Azara refers here to the shame and risk of exposure of an artist's work in general; it could be argued, however, that this statement applies to the predicament of Italian American women authors too. Their stories uncover narratives of struggle, pain, and confusion. These women had to go into the depth and darkness of their own memories to bring the narratives to light and to make sense of the contradictions that doing so often brought. Italian American women, then, are empowered by the experience of writing and revisiting the myth. Not only did these experiences enable them to break the law of silence which overtly rules their communities; by revisiting Persephone's story for our times, these authors have challenged the image of the Italian American woman as linked to the catholic representation of the Madonna. The Virgin Mary has been considered a model that set the rules for the code of behaviour proper for an Italian woman and canon of the mother par excellence.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Rando, p. 28.

⁷⁸ See Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 14.

Writing a memoir for these women is not a mere annotation of facts and emotions of the past. Rather, as argued by Louise DeSalvo, writing a memoir is healing insofar as one writes ‘in a way that links detailed descriptions of what happened with feelings – then and now – about what happened’.⁷⁹ This particular aspect allows the writer to retrieve the past and observe how it affects one’s present. At the same time, however, by writing, the subject perceives how that past has changed and how, often, it can be changed by the act of writing itself. While recomposing the past, the ‘I’ of the writer is in a process of evolution, not yet completed, but no longer what it used to be; it is an ‘I on the threshold’. In the painting *The Return of Persephone* by Frederick Leighton, for instance, the goddess is portrayed on the threshold, between the upper and the underworld, in the act of ascending back to the earth. In Claudian’s *Rape of Proserpine*, when Demeter cannot find her daughter, the poet writes ‘*Persephone nusquam*’, ‘Persephone is nowhere’. Persephone, however, stuck on the threshold, is at once nowhere and everywhere; she inhabits a status of no longer and not yet, underpinning the process of becoming and identity formation.



Figure 2 - Return of Persephone, Frederic Leighton (1891)

⁷⁹ Louise DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling our Stories Transforms our Lives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), p. 25.

Levering memoir as a space of becoming, and the myth of Persephone as both a means of identification and of tracing their cultural past, Italian American women bridge past and present, as well as individual and collective memory. This is one of the greatest achievements accomplished by these authors who, in their memoirs, have been able to articulate the trauma of loss, separation, and reunion originating from their cultural heritage into the myth of Persephone.

Structure of the thesis

This thesis is divided into four main chapters. Chapter One examines the genre of memoir in the context of Italian American women's literature. Romeo argues that 'Il memoir è un genere attraverso il quale soggetti "eccentrici" usano la memoria personale per recuperare una memoria storica sistematicamente ignorata dalla cultura dominante, coniugando scrittura personale e scrittura critica'⁸⁰ (Memoir is a genre through which 'eccentric' subjects use their individual memory to retrieve a historical memory systematically ignored by the prevailing culture, conjugating personal and critical writing). Building on this consideration, I will examine how the memoir is an effective literary expression employed by Italian American women authors to articulate their identity quest through the interplay of memory, myth, and genre. Starting from Tristine Rainer's definition of memoir as 'new autobiography', this chapter will pay attention to the elements which, according to Rainer, have contributed to define memoir as a relevant genre of self-discovery, rather than self-promotion. I will

⁸⁰ Romeo, *Narrative tra due Sponde*, p. 16. For Romeo's use of eccentric subjects, see Teresa de Lauretis, *Soggetti Eccentrici* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1999). All translation from Italian are mine, except where otherwise indicated.

therefore explore some of the possible reasons why canonical autobiography is not perceived as an effective genre for self-representation by Italian American women. Drawing from Rainer's discussion on the 'new voices' appropriating memoir and on the possibility this genre offers to interweave myth and literature, I will look at the interplay of myth and literature emerging from Italian American women's writings.

Chapter Two examines Caperna Lloyd's travel memoir *No Pictures in my Grave*, set in Sicily. In *No Pictures in my Grave*, Caperna Lloyd, a third-generation Italian American author, photographer, and filmmaker, establishes a deep connection with the 400-year-old tradition of the Procession of the Mysteries carried out in the Sicilian city of Trapani and the myth of Persephone as a means to explore her paternal grandmother Carolina's past and the Italian Catholic tradition, part and parcel of Caperna Lloyd's Italian American upbringing in Oregon. In Caperna Lloyd's memoir, the myth is a powerful narrative helping the author to question and to refabricate her ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. This chapter will shed light on the way the myth is employed by Caperna Lloyd to address questions of gender, gender and mobility, as well as questions of hybridity. It will argue that hybridity, in Caperna Lloyd's memoir, emerges as a potent and helpful notion that can help us to establish a fruitful dialogue between different people and models of civilization. As I will also discuss, the myth enables Caperna Lloyd to write a story that debunks stultified myths and stereotypes about Italian American women.

Chapter Three examines Kym Ragusa's *The Skin between Us*. Published in America in 2006 and then translated in Italian with the title *La pelle che ci separa* (2008),⁸¹ the book belongs to the literary genre of memoir and caused remarkable

⁸¹ Kym Ragusa, *La Pelle che ci Separa*, trans. by Caterina Romeo and Clara Antonucci (Roma: Nutrimenti, 2008).

interest among critics; it was named a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Foundation's 2007 Legacy Award in Nonfiction and awarded the 2009 John Fante literary prize for the category *Autore tra due mondi* – author in between two worlds.

My textual analysis of *The Skin between Us* mostly draws on Evelyn Ferraro's reading of Ragusa's memoir. According to Ferraro, Ragusa's process of cultural roots negotiation revolves around three main strategies she enacts: contesting, disordering, and connecting.⁸² In line with Ferraro, I will argue that these three strategies can help us to understand how the author addresses and represents questions of race, class, and gender. My analysis, however, will bring attention to the fact that it is possible to see how these three strategies are linked by a mode of 're-telling'. The 're-telling', in particular, serves to explore the way Ragusa employs the myth of Persephone in her writing. The myth is revisited by the author and rewritten so as to constitute an invaluable source of empowerment and creativity that assigns to memory a leading role in the act of creating a space where hybrid identity can be negotiated.

The fourth and final chapter discusses the family memoir *The Anarchist Bastard* by Clapps Herman. The author was born in 1944 in Waterbury to second-generation Italian American parents. An award-winning writer, she has written in different literary forms – fiction, poetry, and memoir. Clapps Herman began publishing in 1981 and her writings appeared in anthologies and journals on Italian American identity. Her most recent works include the collection of essays *After the Manner of Men and Women* and the collection of short stories *No Longer and Not Yet*.⁸³ In addition, Clapps Herman has

⁸² Ferraro, 'Southern Encounters in the City: Reconfiguring the South from the Liminal Space', in *Small Towns, Big Cities: The Urban Experience of Italian Americans*, ed. by Dennis Barone and Stefano Luconi (New York: Bordighera Press, 2010), pp. 219–27.

⁸³ Joanna Clapps Herman, *After the Manner of Men and Women* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013); Joanna Clapps Herman, *No Longer and Not Yet* (Albany, NY: State University of New York,

also coedited two anthologies, *Our Roots Are Deep with Passion: Creative Nonfiction Collects New Essays by Italian American Writers* (2006) and *Wild Dreams: The Best of Italian Americana* (2008).⁸⁴

In the introduction to *Wild Dreams*, Clapps Herman's co-editor, Bonomo Albright explains that the anthology traces the generational stages of the Italian American journey. Earlier generations, Bonomo Albright claims, did not question their identity. Conversely, today's generation of Americans of Italian heritage struggle to claim one,⁸⁵ as Sorrentino has also argued.⁸⁶ Referring to Richard Gambino's *Blood of my Blood*,⁸⁷ Sorrentino explains that second and third generations of Italian Americans had to develop strategies to negotiate Italian and American values. This process of negotiation entails generational conflicts variously linked to the struggle for cultural recognition in America, as documented in Clapps Herman's memoir. This chapter will look at the way the author employs Homeric literature and Greek mythology to articulate her feelings of in-betweenness and how she has come to terms with her hybrid Italian American identity through writing.

By incorporating the myth of Persephone in their narratives, Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman's memoirs raise interesting and crucial questions about Italian American women who, by tradition or stereotype, were thought to have no intellectual or personal ambition. However, the discovery of a literary tradition, which started in the Eighties has turned the tables and brought to the fore the urge these women had and still have to find a voice which speaks for both themselves and for the

2014). In *No Longer and Not Yet* the author engages with the myth of Demeter and Persephone once more, this time focusing especially on the figure of the mother, Demeter.

⁸⁴ Gutkind and Clapps Herman; Bonomo Albright and Clapps Herman.

⁸⁵ Bonomo Albright and Clapps Herman, p. 3.

⁸⁶ Sorrentino and Krase, p. 4.

⁸⁷ Gambino.

collective. These memoirs question notions of hybridity and ‘historical amnesia’, especially within Italian American literature. These women’s position on the threshold in their narratives – which mirrors Persephone’s condition of the ‘goddess of the *limen*’ as argued by Deidier – questions issues of belonging as well as social hierarchy against traditional, accepted norms. Moreover, these writings stress the feminine dimension depicted by the Greek myth of Persephone and create a parallel between such a structure and today’s society, addressing crucial issues of gender.

Ricarda Schmidt notes that:

In wanting to examine the nature of references to myth in contemporary women’s writing, I find there is no substantial corpus of material which concentrates on the same mythic figure [...] the absence of a continuous tradition of working through specific mythic themes reflects the status of women’s literature as one that has little tradition, or, at least, little consciousness of a tradition.⁸⁸

Although Italian American women authors have often been said to write without a literary tradition to support them, there actually is a consistency in their production. Such a consistency can be recognized in the steady presence of the myth. The three books analysed in this thesis are clear examples of how the myth of Persephone, in particular, reinforces Italian American literature by women and fills in the gap in the American literary canon.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Ricarda Schmidt, ‘Myth in Contemporary Women’s Literature’, in *Literature on the Threshold: The German Novel in the 1980s*, ed. by Arthur Williams, Stuart Parkes, and Roland Smith (New York: Berg, 1990), pp. 253–62 (p. 54). For the relevance and the importance of establishing a literary tradition through the reworking of myths, see Tracey L. Walters, *African American Literature and the Classicist Tradition: Black Women Writers from Wheatley to Morrison* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007).

⁸⁹ For a discussion on the American Literary Canon, see William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Bona, *Claiming a Tradition; The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature: A Reader of Original Texts with English Translation*, ed. by Marc Shell and Werner Sollors (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

Chapter 1

‘No more masks! No more mythologies!’¹

Persephone and Italian American Women Writers’ Memoirs

In this chapter, I investigate how memoir has made its way through the American literary scene and has become a pivotal mode of self-expression and narration for Italian American women writers. Starting from Rainer’s definition of memoir as the ‘New Autobiography’,² I look at the elements that have contributed to the ascent and affirmation of this genre. According to Rainer’s definition, the main aspects of memoir that single it out are the ‘new voices’ who appropriate and express themselves through the genre of memoir, its self-discovery function, and its stylistic employment of storytelling devices, as well as the possibility it offers to combine literature and myth. The self-discovery function and the aspect of the ‘new voices’ will be the main focus of this chapter.

In order to define the ‘new voices’ that write memoirs, I will begin by tracing the line of the literary collocation of memoir in the areas of creative nonfiction writing and autobiography. Unlike normative autobiography, memoir takes shape as a non-homogeneous narrative. As memory appears as an involuntary jolt of the mind, its written expression is presented in the memoir in a non-chronological order. Stories are often lacking a definite incipit and/or a conclusion; the memoir, thus, offers a panoramic view of memory with its lacunae that the author aims to fill.

¹ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Speed of Darkness* (New York: Random House, 1960), p. 3.

² Tristine Rainer, *Your Life as Story: Writing the New Autobiography* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1997), p. 10.

Presenting itself as a democratic form of writing, able to give voice to disenfranchised subjects, it is a genre that lends itself to the articulation of issues of race, gender, class, politics, and religion. For these reasons, women, who have too often been perceived as passive spectators of men creating literature and history, appropriate the memoir as a vehicle for self-expression, creativity and power. This is relevant with regard to the Italian American writing women's literary tradition, which was brought to the attention of a larger public by Barolini's anthology *The Dream Book*.³ This seminal work helps us to reflect on the significance and appropriateness of the definition of Italian American women writers as 'new voices' of contemporary literature.

The second part of this chapter looks at the interplay of myth and literature discussed by Rainer. I will explore this connection in Italian American women's memoirs by drawing on Gardaphé's argument about the importance of orality in Italian American literature.⁴ As Gardaphé suggests, because most Italians lacked literacy when they migrated to America at the end of the nineteenth century, to look at the oral substratum that cements their past means to acknowledge the importance of orality and folklore as precious testimonials for future generations. Moreover, it offers literary critics a tool to investigate how later generations fashion their sense of ethnicity out of oral traditions and storytelling.

In this chapter, I will connect the spheres of myth, orality, and literature through the investigation of the employment of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone, as it is reworked and incorporated in the narratives of Italian American women's memoirs. The myth can be divided into three main action scenes: the moment of the abduction, the descent into the underworld, and the return to earth. Following this pattern, I will

³ Barolini, *The Dream Book*.

⁴ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, pp. 119–23.

explore Italian American women's experience as echoing the myth in its main stages. Thus, the last part of this chapter will investigate the moment of the departure of Italian American women, understood as a moment of fracture with their Italian family in America. Challenging the patriarchal rules that govern their life, female authors embark on a journey of self-discovery to come to terms with their hybrid identity through writing. In their narratives, Italian American women question the role of family, education, and the Italian American community into which they were raised. The process of writing a memoir, in particular, enables Italian American women authors to gain empowerment from their own stories and traumas by means of bridging individual and collective memory. Part and parcel of the collective memory, then, is the myth, which functions as fertile terrain for these women's stories. An important source of creativity and autobiographical reference, the myth is a means of self-expression and identification that reflects the condition of being split between two opposing and irreconcilable spheres, the Italian and the American worlds.

The most important treasure these women find, once they ascend back from their journey into the underworld, is the strong sisterhood established through the texts they write and publish. These works echo each other, and all contribute to the building of an Italian American literature that redeems the story of Italian migrants in America, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of Italian American women writers.

1. Memoir and nonfiction

According to Rainer's definition in her *Your Life as Story*, memoir is 'New Autobiography'. 'New Autobiography', she argues, is:

A vibrantly democratic and deeply personal type of narrative writing [...] It is new because it is being written by new voices, not only those who represent the official and dominant view from the top. It is new because it is written as self-discovery rather than self-promotion. It is new because it beholds the individual's life, not through Puritan mandates of moral edification, nor nineteenth-century credos of materialistic success, nor twentieth-century formulas of reductionist psychology, but through the cohesion of literature and myth. Stylistically it is new because it employs storytelling devices, such as scenes and dialogues that are borrowed from fiction.⁵

Rainer's definition is of particular relevance here as it, firstly, advocates for the appropriation of the genre by 'new voices', namely the ones that the 'old' autobiography as a 'master genre' has neglected.⁶ Secondly, it foregrounds the possibility the memoir offers to conjugate literature and myth. To begin to understand what 'new voice' means, however, we need to go one step backwards and see how memoir has developed and asserted itself independently from autobiography, and how it has become an object of academic inquiry.

Despite the diverse, and often divergent, definitions of memoir provided throughout the years, critics tend to agree on the idea of memoir as a form of life writing or a sub-genre of autobiography. Memoir, however, could also be considered as belonging to

⁵ Rainer, p. 10.

⁶ For 'master genre' I refer to Lyotard's idea of 'grand narrative' or 'master narratives'. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

creative nonfiction. Michael Steinberg and Robert L. Root define nonfiction as ‘the written expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience’.⁷ According to Steinberg and Root, under the label of creative nonfiction one can find a broad array of writing praxes responding to the above-mentioned definitions, which span from personal essays, memoirs, literary journalism, and academic/cultural criticism.⁸ For, Patti Miller “‘life writing’” means non-fiction writing’,⁹ as it includes non-fiction writing autobiography, biography, memoir, memoirs, personal essays, and travel and sojourn writings.

According to these definitions, memoir presents characteristics typical of the writings that fall into the nonfiction genre. Creative nonfiction willingly, and almost provocatively, exhibits the objective grounds of the events narrated, which draws from verifiable news and/or current crucial issues. The data is then articulated through the neutral and impersonal slant of journalism or essay writing. These writings, then, present a narrative structure that includes many of the aspects typical of narrative, this being creative or fictional, starting from the scenario, the unfolding of the plot, the employment of imagination, the use of cinematic devices such as flashbacks or analepsis, and the employment of irony and symbolism.¹⁰ The two worlds of fiction and non-fiction, however, have always co-existed. As Simone Barillari observes:

A lungo, in letteratura, sono stati abitati, in modo parallelo e distinto, i territori della finzione e della non-fiction, ossia del romanzo – chiamiamolo così – e di generi invece come la saggistica, l’autobiografia classica, il reportage di viaggio, il diario.

⁷ *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, ed. by Michael Steinberg and Robert L. Root Jr (New York: Pearson and Longman, 2007), p. xxx (the quotation is in italics in the book).

⁸ Steinberg and Root Jr, p. xv.

⁹ Patti Miller, *The Memoir Book* (Crows Nest, NSW.: Allen & Unwin, 2007), p. 3.

¹⁰ Judith Barrington, *Writing the Memoir* (St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 2000).

Certo, è sempre esistita una regione di confine, dove si appanna ogni distinzione tra queste due categorie, ma fino a non molto tempo fa non sembrava annoverare molti esempi, mentre si direbbe ormai evidente anche a un rapido sguardo che da un certo periodo le opere in questa regione di confine – forme narrative che modellano contenuti di non-fiction, ibridazioni di saggistica e romanzo, e così via – stanno particolarmente crescendo in numero e complessità.

(For a long time, in literature, genres like that of essay writing, classical autobiography, travel writing, diary, and the territories of fiction and non-fiction, namely the novel – let's call it so – have been inhabited in a distinct and parallel way. Certainly, a confining area where every distinction between these two blurs has always existed, but until recently, it did not seem a lot of examples existed, whereas today, even at a first look, it would seem clear that, from a certain period onwards, works occupying this confining area – narrative forms moulding non-fiction contents, hybridization of essay writing and novel and so forth – have been increasing both in number and complexity.)¹¹

Barillari suggests that hybrid writings like memoir have been catching the attention of readers, writers, critics, and publishers. However, the genre is also criticized when it becomes a catalyst for sensational stories that have little literary value and are written by lesser known authors.¹² What, then, is the reason why more and more authors today have been drawn to engage with this genre? What is the allure, the potential it holds?

¹¹ Simone Barillari, 'Iperfunzionalità del mondo e autenticazione del reale', interview by Stefania Ricciardi, in «Bollettino '900»: *Electronic Journal of '900 Italian Literature*, 1.2 (2007), <<http://www3.unibo.it/boll900/numeri/2007-i/Ricciardi.html>, [accessed 6 January 2015] (para. 2 of 17). With reference to the novel, it is worth remembering that the oxymoronic expression 'nonfiction novel' can be traced back to Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1967). Capote's book impressed the critics for the remarkable way in which the author managed to combine the horizontal objectivity of the facts with the vertical subjectivity of the writer. In an interview article with Capote issued in *The New York Times*, George Plimpton writes that '*In Cold Blood* is remarkable for its objectivity – nowhere, despite his involvement, does the author intrude'. Thus Plimpton introduces Capote's work as 'the new literary art form' named by Capote 'nonfiction novel'. Although Capote's masterpiece signals a turn in literature, it is also true that it is not the first time that we can witness the fusion of fiction and nonfiction in literature. Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood: A True Account of a Multiple Murder and its Consequences* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965). George Plimpton, 'The Story Behind a Nonfiction Novel', *The New York Times on the Web*, 16 January 1996, <<http://www.nytimes.com/books/97/12/28/home/capote-interview.html>> [accessed 4 January 2015].

¹² See Neil Genzlinger, 'The Problem with Memoirs', in *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 January, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/books/review/Genzlinger-t.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0> [accessed 28 November 2014].

According to Kym Ragusa, the issue is not that contemporary memoirists write about personal pain; rather, that they fail to make this individual experience a collective one.¹³ An effective memoir has to interrogate its reader and reveal its potential in the ‘possibility of personal transformations’ which ‘is deeply connected to one’s development as a writer (and as a reader)’.¹⁴ While writing his/her story, the author is indeed ‘a self-in-process – in the process of becoming, of thinking and writing itself into being – and thus incomplete; though it becomes, this self is aware of the impossibility of full self-completion and self-presentation’.¹⁵ Memoir, as Rainer suggested, ‘is written as self-discovery rather than self-promotion’. Memoir, thus, is the field of invention and reinvention of a life, a self, and memory itself because ‘the narrative is told from the point of view [...] of the “I” who understands’¹⁶ and makes sense of the painful events s/he is writing about. The creation of nonfictional self, life, and memory takes shape as both the main subject and object of inquiry through an autobiographical writing strategy – the memoir – in which the very same concepts of subject, life, and memory are open to contestation. This becomes clear when memoir, as we will now examine, is coupled with and opposed to the genre of autobiography.

2. Autobiography and memoir: a tug-of-war

¹³ Kym Ragusa, ‘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 Works of Louise DeSalvo*, ed. by Nancy Caronia and Edvige Giunta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 105–10 (p. 107).

¹⁴ Ragusa, ‘On Vulnerability and Risk’, p. 107.

¹⁵ Joshua Fausty, ‘Louise DeSalvo: Essaying Memoir’, in *Personal Effects: Essays on Memoir, Teaching, and Culture in the Works of Louise DeSalvo*, ed. by Nancy Caronia and Edvige Giunta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), pp. 86–104 (p. 88).

¹⁶ Ragusa, ‘On Vulnerability and Risk’, p. 107.

The question of how memoir differs from autobiography is not a new one. The debate on memoir and autobiography has been developing in the United States for the last thirty years and there is a growing interest towards memoir and why it is now so popular and sensational. In their definitions of the genre, scholars and critics tend to pin down specificities when comparing memoir to autobiography.¹⁷ Smith and Watson, for instance, argue that, although it is not uncommon today for the terms autobiography and memoir to overlap, important differences between the two do exist.¹⁸

In 1950, George Misch defined autobiography as ‘the description (*graphia*) of an individual human life (*bios*) by the individual himself (*autos*)’.¹⁹ According to Misch, in autobiographies, one could read Western history through the deeds of representative lives. The idea of a representative life, then, is defined by ‘the author’s participation in contemporary life’,²⁰ therefore, it is bound to the author’s public fame or notoriety.

Moreover, as Misch argues:

When autobiography is produced [...] by a person of exceptional calibre, it provides a supreme example of representation – the contemporary intellectual outlook revealed in the style of an eminent person who has himself played a part in the forming of the spirit of his life.²¹

¹⁷ For instance see *De/Colonizing the Subject: the Politics of Gender in Women’s Autobiography*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1992); ‘Preface’ to *The Vintage Book of Canadian Memoirs*, ed. by George Fetherling (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001), pp. vii–x; Helen M. Buss, *Repossessing the World: Reading Memoirs by Contemporary Women* (Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2002); Julie Rak, ‘Are Memoirs Autobiography? A Consideration of Memoir and Public Identity’, *Genre: Forms of Discourse and Culture*, 37.3/4 (2004), 483–504.

¹⁸ Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 198.

¹⁹ Georg Misch, *History of Autobiography*, trans. by E. W. Dickes, 2 vols (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1950), I, p. 5.

²⁰ Misch, p. 12.

²¹ Misch, pp. 12–3.

This emphasis on the representative life as the measure for the construction of Western history does not account for issues of gender, race, class, religion, and political status.²² It is not until the late twentieth century, in fact, in the light of postcolonial and postmodern interventions, that peripheral subjects' lives start receiving recognition. Misch's definition itself – provided in 1907 – clearly leaves women outside of the practice of autobiography as he speaks of a male writing subject. This is just an example to understand why and how, before feminist critics brought to the fore the importance of women's autobiography towards the end of the 1970s, little attention was paid to women's writings. In the 1980s, and in relation to women's autobiography, Estelle Jelinek's collection of fourteen essays, *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*,²³ was an important contribution to the debate. Jelinek compares men's autobiographical writing to women's, and identifies some of the elements that differentiate them, on the level of content, scripts, and temporal dimension. For instance, men tend to assert themselves from a professional point of view and tend to project themselves into a life path of prestige. Their writings generally follow a chronological order, as if everything was in place. Conversely, women's writings tend to accentuate the domestic space and create a more empathic feeling with the reader, an intimate atmosphere. Through their texts women question themselves and their lives, and their investigation is characterized by a discontinuous and not homogenous temporality. Even though Jelinek's work must be given the merit of having opened the path to further studies on women's autobiography, many scholars have critiqued its overriding focus on gender at the expense of the interplay of class, race, and religion, as well as the geographic and

²² *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998).

²³ *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Estelle Jelinek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).

political positions of the subject – essential variables in a global understanding of the writing voice.²⁴ Moreover, the theoretical limitations offered by the clear separation between women and men’s writing have been questioned in later studies.²⁵ For instance, T.L Broughton and Smith have argued that what Domna Stanton has defined as ‘genderic difference’²⁶ – to distinguish the difference underlying women’s and men’s writings – does not consistently take place, and chronological autobiographical narratives are not a male prerogative. Women, that is, have similarly engaged with this narrative structure. At the same time, non-coherent and non-linear autobiographies have been written by both women and men.²⁷ After Jelinek’s publication, other works have engaged with the theorizing of women’s autobiography. In Smith’s *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography* and Lionnet’s *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, the investigation of the historicity of women’s silence becomes central.²⁸ How can women assert themselves and their authority ‘in a patriarchal and androcentric genre’?²⁹ Due to the fact that women have been excluded from the public banquet of making literature and contributing ideas, they tend to project a literary self that mirrors this condition of marginality. Perceiving their identity as provisional, fragmented, multiple, and fragile, women weave narratives that do not offer ‘the truth’ as institutionally recognized and acknowledged through the writing of autobiography. Rather, their stories reveal the process of understanding and recreating a version of truth.

²⁴ Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 9.

²⁵ *Autobiography and Questions of Gender*, ed. by Shirley Neuman (London: F. Cass, 1991).

²⁶ Domna C. Stanton, ‘Autogynography: Is the Subject Different?’, in *The Female Autograph: Theory and Practice of Autobiography from the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Domna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 3–20,(p. 11).

²⁷ T. L. Broughton, ‘Women’s Autobiography: The Self at Stake?’, *Prose Studies: History, Theory, Criticism*, 14.2 (1991), 76–94; Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

²⁸ Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*; Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989).

²⁹ Smith, *A Poetics of Women’s Autobiography*, p. 45.

In their writings, the unquestionable truth is replaced by what Giunta, for instance, in the introduction to DeSalvo's *Vertigo*, explains as 'the multiple, provisional account that memory generates: these accounts contain a different kind of truth, the elusive, not always reassuring truth of memory'.³⁰ Women seem to drift away from the genre of autobiography as it is not representative of their life experience, and express themselves through other forms of life narrative and autobiographical praxes like diaries, letters, journals, and, in our specific case, memoirs. These forms of writing, in fact, allow women to rework their lives as, in them, the narrative 'I' can be fictionalized, and, therefore, rewritten.³¹ It is crucial, then, to study these forms as they are revealing of how women 'forge "new concepts of history and subjectivity" as emergent "in and through all individuals" rather than in the "great man"'.³² The following section will discuss some definitions of memoir that can help us to understand why this genre has affirmed itself among women as a form of resistance and liberation from social and patriarchal constraints. This is particularly relevant with regard to contemporary memoir written by Italian American authors.

3. The memoir: negotiating voice, form, and memory

According to Judith Barrington, 'memoir is [...] a kind of hybrid form with elements of both fiction and essay, in which the author's voice, musing conversationally on a true story, is all important.'³³ One crucial aspect of memoir, then, is the voice that narrates

³⁰ Edvige Giunta, "'My stories aren't all true": Memory, Writing, and Salvation in *Vertigo*', in Louise DeSalvo, *Vertigo: A Memoir* (New York: Feminist Press, 2002), pp. ix–xxix (p. xxiv).

³¹ Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, p. 46.

³² Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 24.

³³ Barrington, p. 22.

the story. The author of memoir engages in a conversation with herself and the reader in an attempt to shed light on a particular section of her life. In the process of writing, the way the subject negotiates her historical and geographical position is as important as the truthfulness of the events she narrates. According to Smith and Watson, memoir is, however, also a relational genre. It is ‘a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant; the memoir directs attention more towards the lives and actions of others than to the narrator’.³⁴ Through memoir writing, the subject gains selfhood by means of connecting her own experience to the experience of the collectivity. Memoir, thus, is an all-encompassing narrative that values both the self and the others. It is a genre that moves roundly. It starts from the self, circumnavigates the broader collective’s life experience, and returns to the subject who, eventually, is enriched and empowered, and whose identity is constructed by her relation with the collective into which she is inscribed. Within this process, the memoir reveals its bevelled, digressive nature. This is because it reproduces, better than any other genre, the narrative flow of memory, and the fragmented structure of memories. Giunta highlights the relationship between the form of the memoir and the way the author perceives her position as precarious in relation to her self-assertion. As she explains – by differentiating memoir from autobiography:

I understand autobiography to be the writing of a life as perceived from a standpoint of achieved cultural as well as personal awareness and certainty. [...]

³⁴ Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, p. 198. For a definition of life writing, see also Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson. Scarparo and Wilson argue that life writing is an overarching term that includes ‘narratives that cross the line between fact and fiction’. What makes life-writing narratives of particular interest is their ‘different strategies for negotiating hybrid identity/identities’. Therefore, life writing is an effective narrative that allows the writing subject to create an in-between space apt to articulate his/her quest for identity. *Across Genres, Generations and Borders: Italian Women Writing Lives*, ed. by Susanna Scarparo and Rita Wilson (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004), p. 2.

Unlike autobiography, the memoir – or at least the memoir I write about and teach – lends itself to fragmentary and discontinuous narratives, which bespeak cultural as well as personal dislocation and fracture.³⁵

The memoir, in fact, does not present a homogenous, linear, and complete panorama of memory; conversely, the narrative of memory is represented as blurry, patchy, foggy, and discontinuous. The story often lacks a beginning and/or ending and also the chronological order is subverted. Women writers challenge autobiography through memoir writing by questioning their position in the world, as women, writers, and as split between different cultures. The way the author decides to explore her life, then, tells the reader something about the author's perception of her own existence and the reasons that underpin the writing itself. As Gail Godwin writes, 'shapes are the way in which we know who we are and where we are in our universe. Show me the shapes and forms a man give to his life, and I will tell you whether he is a master or a victim of that life.'³⁶

All these definitions address the importance of the writing voice, shift the focus from the sovereignty of the 'I' to the process of its identity formation, and reflect on the form of the genre. What we also need to consider, however, is the crucial role memory plays in the process of the writing subject's evolution and transformation. In her critical work about the growth and affirmation of the genre of memoir in the American literary scene, Romeo highlights that the term autobiography is constituted by the words *αὐτός, βίος, γραφή*: self, life, and writing; memoir, instead, is characterized by the presence of memory. In particular, it is possible to witness a 'passaggio, scivolamento dell'attenzione dalla vita reale, e quindi in qualche modo dalla *verità*, al ricordo e quindi

³⁵ Edvige Giunta, 'Teaching Memoir at Jersey City State College', *Transformations*, 11.1 (2000), 80–89, as quoted in Caterina Romeo, *Narrative Tra Due Sponde*, p. 56.

³⁶ Gail Godwin, *Glass People* (New York: Twayne, 1992), p. 99.

alla *memoria*'³⁷ (passage, a shift from the focus on real life, and therefore, somehow, from the *truth*, to the *memory* and the act of remembering). We move from the telling of a life to the remembering of a life. Memoir is indeed a strategy of life writing that is identity-construction oriented. The memoir takes shape as a mode of rereading one's life as informed by memory. The memoir, more importantly, accounts not for a single truth, but for a collective truth that is pieced together by the author through a process of contestation and negotiation between private and collective memory. In this way, the referential autobiographical 'I' leaves its place to an 'I' which is constructed in relation to the 'Other'. The authorial truth asserted by the autobiography seems to provide the reader with a finite product, whereas memoir is a project of collective creation, in which the reader participates in the writer's identity formation. Relating to the author's experience, the reader can question his/her own life. The subject takes shape in front of both the writer and the reader as – following Lacan – the 'Other' is the *locus* where the 'I' can come to life.³⁸

Definitions of memoir as opposed to autobiography address also the importance of the shift from truth to the authenticity of memory. In an interview with Romeo, Louise DeSalvo stressed how:

Memoir is about memory, it's about remembering, as opposed to autobiography, which is about verifiable facts. I say to you: 'When I was a little girl I was sitting on the steps of Sacred Heart Academy waiting for my mother, and I remember sitting on the steps and the steps were concrete'. That's how I remember it. The steps were hard, I remember feeling how hard they were. That's memoir. If you are writing autobiography, you go there and you check the steps. You verify things, you check them out. [Memoir] ... is about the stories that we hold in our head about our lives, and that's our reality. My reality is not what really

³⁷ Romeo, *Narrative tra due Sponde*, p. 53.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 1–7 (p. 5).

happened when my father and I had that fight. My reality is the way I remember it. And so ... memoir ... is about *what* we remember and *how* we remember, and how we *misremember*, and how we even change our memories.³⁹

This statement seems to dissolve the relevance of an absolute truth and of an absolute 'I' as the main subjects inherent in the process of life writing. It is not the finite subject that matters, rather the process of the making of that specific subject. Memoir, then, originates at the intersection of the events narrated, the way those events are remembered by the writer, and how their rewriting affects the writer's life. In the process of memoir writing, the author looks at herself, at her own 'Other' who she discovers anew. The 'Other' of the memoir becomes real as 'through writing, we revisit our past and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believe happened to us shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths'.⁴⁰ The memoir, as a mirror, returns the image of the writer as shaped by fragmented memories. As Gardaphé reminds us, 'memory comes in pieces'.⁴¹ Therefore, the way the author gravitates around these pieces of memory and crafts her narrative out of these describes how 'with these fragments' she has been able to 'shore her life'.

The kind of memory employed in the practice of memoir writing responds to what has been defined by Laplanche as 'afterwardness'.⁴² The memory retrieved in the present is not a mere appropriation of the past. Rather, it implies a negotiation between the events recalled and the subject who is re-living them in the present. This specific act of remembering includes in the 'now' people, objects, events, and emotions that were

³⁹ Caterina Romeo, 'Caterina Romeo intervista Louise DeSalvo', in *Origini – Le scrittrici italo americane*, ed. by Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, Edvige Giunta, and Caterina Romeo (= tutte-Storie, 8 March-May (2001)), pp. 7–9 (p. 8).

⁴⁰ DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*, p. 11.

⁴¹ Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy*, p. 95.

⁴² Jean Laplanche, 'Notes on Afterwardness', in *Seduction, Translation, Drives*, ed. by John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992), pp. 217–23.

unknown in the ‘then’. Memoir, thus, is a process of possible reconciliation, a site of reconstruction, where the present subject meets and interacts with the past subject. The subject who remembers is recalling the past at a present time, thus, unfolding a retrospective narrative that accounts for a reinterpretation of the past in the present. Experiences are remembered and *misremembered*, enacting what James Olney, in relation to his analysis of St Augustine’s *Confessions*, has called ‘processual memory’.⁴³

As Olney says:

The weaver’s shuttle and loom constantly produce new and different patterns, designs, and forms, and if the operation of memory is, like weaving, ... processual, then it will bring forth ever different memorial configurations and an ever newly shaped self.⁴⁴

DeSalvo’s idea of remembering and *misremembering* echoes Olney’s idea of ‘processual memory’ as a metaphor of the act of weaving. To remember and to *misremember* contributes to the constant rewriting of memory and to how this, in turn, generates a never ending forging of new selves throughout history. As DeSalvo states in her interview with Romeo, ‘we exist always as several different selves.’⁴⁵ This statement is reinforced by DeSalvo in another interview in which she insists that

The major reason that you can [...] write memoir your whole life [...] and you can write about the same subject your whole life [...] is that there is no single portrait. [...] [Portraits] shift and change through time. That’s the reality. We’re at different stages of the life cycle each time we write.⁴⁶

⁴³ James Olney, *Memory & Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), p. 20.

⁴⁴ Olney, *Memory & Narrative*, p. 20.

⁴⁵ Romeo, ‘Caterina Romeo intervista Louise DeSalvo’, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Caronia and Giunta, p. 1.

DeSalvo's idea of memoir – as opposed to autobiography – then, makes it clear how every subject is entitled to his/her own truth and that the recollection of memory is not a painless and tidy process. Rather, it responds to the idea of 'postmemory', as explained by Marianne Hirsch. 'Postmemory'

characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation, shaped by traumatic events that can be neither fully understood nor re-created.⁴⁷

'Postmemory', thus, foregrounds the burden of the inheritance of an emotional baggage deriving from a haunting past passed down from one generation to the next. Because this past is lived through the stories of our forebears, we can understand how 'postmemory' also enables subjects to make sense of memory, not through a mechanical method of recollecting memories, rather 'through an imaginative investment and creation'.⁴⁸ With regard to Italian American women, the memoir is a literary expression that allows these women to acknowledge the fractures created by the opposition of two distant worlds and the (im)possibility to make these coexist organically in one dimension. Through the practice of memoir, which demands a negotiation between past and present, authentic and truthful, mechanical and processual modes of retrieving memory, Italian American women attempt to create an osmotic process between these polarities to grapple with the way pre-existing narratives are reflected and translated in the process of their Italian American hybrid formation. It is, then, possible to understand that for marginalized and displaced subjects – among whom are women and migrants –

⁴⁷ Marianne Hirsch, 'Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile', in *Poetics Today*, 17.4: *Creativity and Exile: European/American Perspectives II* (1996), 659–86 (p. 659).

⁴⁸ Hirsch, p. 659.

the memoir, as a site of reinvention and negotiation, becomes a means of empowerment and identity quest.

4. The literary marginality of Italian American women authors

One of the main works tracing the origins and development of the writing of memoir by Italian American women is Romeo's *Narrative Tra Due Sponde*.⁴⁹ In her book Romeo presents the origins and history of memoir in the United States. The scholar critically discusses how this genre has developed as a literary expression that allows for the articulation of issues of gender, race, class, ethnicity, language, and identity through the intervention of memory. The potential of memoir, according to Romeo, lies in its democratic nature which enables marginal subjects to reappropriate and negotiate historical memory. Italian American women's autobiographical literary production dates back to *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* (1872) by the Ligurian nun Blandina Segale.⁵⁰ Nonetheless, studies of women's autobiography and autobiographical writing did not start before the 1980s, confirming the condition of marginality suffered by these women. Barolini largely contributed to the claiming of an Italian American literary tradition through her anthology *The Dream Book*, published in 1984.

This ground-breaking anthology groups together fifty-six works written by Italian American women and ranging between the nineteenth and the second half of the

⁴⁹ Romeo, *Narrative Tra Due Sponde*.

⁵⁰ Blandina Segale, *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail* ([n.p.]: Columbian Press, 1932; repr. Milwaukee: Bruce, 1948). This is a diary written by a nun in epistolary form and addressed to her sister, also a nun. In these letters, Sister Blandina told her sister about the incidents that happened to her on her journey to Trinidad. On the importance of this text and how it challenges the stereotype of the submissive woman choosing to live a 'life of action' as defined by Gilbert and Gubar, see Caterina Romeo, 'Sister Blandina alla Conquista del West', *tutteStorie*, 6 (September-November 2000), 85–86. On the issue of 'life of significant action' see *Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 21.

twentieth century. It is divided into five sections: memoirs, nonfiction, fiction, drama, and poetry. Barolini's desire to compile this anthology was triggered by the fact that until then, no publication by Italian American women was available. In compiling the anthology, Barolini proves that Italian American women did write, and wonders why it took so long for this literature to be acknowledged. Did Italian American female writers lack something which Jewish, Black, Native American, and Chicano women did not? In trying to understand the main reasons that delayed the claim of Italian American literature in the American literary scene, Barolini suggests that such literature was confronted with what she called 'internal' and 'external blocks'.⁵¹ Barolini attributes the internal block to the relationship of Italian American women with their highly patriarchal community of belonging, and with the American society in which they grew up. Goeller – following Bonomo Albright – suggests that the process of acculturation experienced by Italian Americans can be divided into four stages.⁵² In the first stage trust and hope triggered the migration of thousands of (poor and often illiterate) Italians to America in search of a better life, at the end of the nineteenth century. The second stage is characterized by the fading of hope due to the racism and discrimination Italians had to face once they landed in the New World. This stage includes the clashing of Italian values with those of the host culture. The third stage is that of confusion, when the third generation of Italian Americans found themselves at odds with both Italian and American cultures. Finally, in the fourth stage of reconciliation, Italian Americans started intertwining Italian and American values. This final stage is underpinned by a revision of the canon defining Italian American women.

⁵¹ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, pp. 21–44.

⁵² Goeller, pp. 73–4.

The pressures exercised by the Italian American culture led these women to feel trapped in a monolithic dimension of fixity. Often subject to remarks such as ‘shut up, you’re not a boy’, or ‘girls can’t have opinions’,⁵³ they ended up perceiving their authority as second to men’s and, consequently, their lives as unworthy of being told. Barolini thus interprets these women’s anxiety to seek empowerment through the act of writing their stories.

Barolini identifies the ‘external blocks’ that have delayed the recognition of Italian American women’s literature in the resistance the literary mainstream has directed towards Italian American literature at large. Barolini highlights how important it is for any type of literature to be published and taught in order for it to survive.⁵⁴ The preference or tendency of American culture for stereotypical images of Italian Americans as mobsters, buffoons, and ignorant people, is evident in the way American society happily welcomed Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* in 1969 and Gay Talese’s *Honor Thy Father* in 1971. These works, in fact, seemed to accommodate preconceived and pre-packaged representations of the Italian American community and asked for no revision of the Italian American experience.⁵⁵ The merit of Barolini’s anthology, then, is that it offered, for the first time, an Italian American women’s literature which, by using memory and myth to bridge the space between the individual and the community, challenged Italian stereotypes and proved the existence of a valid Italian American female literary tradition.

⁵³ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ Scholars of Italian American literature agree with Barolini’s position and have been fighting for this literature to be inserted into school programs, and have engaged in the publication of texts dedicated to the teaching of Italian American literature. One of the latest publications is Giunta and McCormick.

⁵⁵ In a recent publication, a companion book to the PBS (Public Broadcasting Service) documentary series directed by John Maggio, Maria Laurino contributes to debunking the myth of Mario Puzo’s *The Godfather* as representative of the Italian American community. The author lays bare the commonplace stereotypes about Italian Americans, linked to the world of the Mafia, originating from Puzo’s book and its movie adaptation directed by Francis Ford Coppola. Maria Laurino, *The Italian Americans: A History* (New York: Norton, 2014).

In a recent interview, however, Barolini has claimed that it is time to move forward and that Italian American literature should look at ways of being included in the canon of American literature. As Barolini says, ‘dobbiamo però andare avanti. Dobbiamo appartenere alla grande letteratura, che è quella americana’ (we need to move forward. We need to belong to the main literature, which is the American one).⁵⁶ This statement underlines how, although much work has been done so far, and is still being done, to acknowledge the historical and literary value of Italian American writing, further work is needed to break the banks of the American literary mainstream.⁵⁷

In relation to what we have seen so far, then, it can be argued that the ‘new voices’ brought to the fore by Rainer’s definition are not necessarily ‘new’. Rather, it is the ear that has changed. What is new is indeed the attention these writings and, consequently, these women have been attracting. This proves that memoirs do produce a cultural change which is future-oriented. As I am going to discuss, it is also ‘the cohesion of myth and literature’ emerging from Italian American women’s memoirs as a means to bridge and negotiate past and present that contributes to memoir’s democratic and political aspect.

5. The vessel of memory through orality and storytelling

When Rainer discusses the interplay of myth and literature, rather than alluding to the well-known mythic method of T.S. Eliot’s memory which puts emphasis on the

⁵⁶ Interview with Helen Barolini by Margherita Ganeri, in *L’America Italiana: Epos e Storytelling in Helen Barolini* (Arezzo: Zona, 2010), p. 146.

⁵⁷ See for instance Barolini, *The Dream Book*; Mary Jo Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths: Narratives of Resistance in America* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2012); DeSalvo and Giunta. For others, see also the introduction to this thesis, p. 7, n. 19.

attainment of ‘impersonality’⁵⁸, she considers the possibility of drawing on a past encoded in lore and traditions conveyed through storytelling. All cultures, in fact, have stories, myths, folktales that have been passed down from one generation to the next for centuries. These stories constitute the cultural values that sustain that specific culture.⁵⁹ The Italian American community is characterized by an oral tradition, so much so, that critic Gardaphé suggests that, when analysing Italian American literature, one has to pay attention to the way oral stories are incorporated in the narratives and how they constitute the source and lifeblood of these texts.⁶⁰

In relation to autobiography, Misch argues that, its recollection of the unfolding of Western history through the voice of the author who took part in the process of making history allows it to bridge the gap caused by ‘many errors accepted and facts distorted even by historians of talent’.⁶¹ In a similar fashion, studying the way oral stories enter Italian American women’s narratives is a way to cover the gaps and acknowledge the history of the Italian migrants. When they migrated to America, they lacked literacy and, therefore, related on orality to transmit their knowledge and cultural baggage. The stories reworked by Italian American writers, hinging on orality and storytelling in the form of myth, become a fertile ground for Italian American women’s literary creativity, and a journey of discovery of both their families’ pasts and their own selves. At the same time, their stories become precious testimony for the generations to come, who

⁵⁸ Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 30; see also T. S. Eliot, ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’ (1923), in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), pp. 175–78.

⁵⁹ Miller, p. 101.

⁶⁰ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 123.

⁶¹ Misch, p. 12.

can find a way to rediscover their cultural heritage inscribed in their Mediterranean origins,⁶² as well as in ‘the heart of Magna Grecia’.⁶³

Such cultural heritage emerges, for instance, when Italian American women rework, out of the many myths and mythological stories, the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone as a means of self-discovery and self-identity in their own writings. Myth is an important aspect of literature, as ‘mythology is at the very center of things in any society’⁶⁴ and it provides society with symbols and possible ways to interpret and to understand the world.

Why is the myth of Persephone an effective vehicle for the self-representation of Italian American women? One reason could be that this myth is linked to the origins of Italian migrants in America. Many of these women, and their families, originally come from southern Italian regions; the myth of Persephone, then, set in the heart of Sicily, is an expression of their peasant origins and symbolic of the agricultural life they led in Italy. Furthermore, the magnetic force of the myth resides in the nature of the myth itself: a story of sisterhood, female empowerment, and metaphorical rebirth.

As discussed earlier, the myth of Persephone can be divided into three main scenes: the abduction, the journey, and the return. Similarly, Italian American women’s writings echo the narrative structure of the myth, as we are now going to examine.⁶⁵

6. Abduction and departure

⁶² See Giunta, ‘Persephone’s Daughters’, p. 774.

⁶³ Giunta, ‘Persephone’s Daughters’, p. 774.

⁶⁴ *Introduction to Myth*, ed. by Peter R. Stillman (Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden Book, 1977), p. 5.

⁶⁵ For a further reading on the relationship between mythic archetype and memoir, see Maureen Murdock, ‘Memoir as Contemporary Myth’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Pacifica Graduate Institute, Santa Barbara, 2010).

According to the most common version of the myth of Persephone, the story begins with the goddess' abduction carried out by her uncle Hades. While the young virgin is plucking a beautiful narcissus, created with the purpose to attract her and trick her, the earth opens wide below her feet and Hades appears on his golden chariot. He abducts Persephone, who screams with fear, and drags her to his kingdom, the world of the dead, to make Persephone his wife and companion against her will. Although the abduction is an act of violence, this marks a moment of change for the young child, who will become a wife and the Queen of the Dead. Taken away from her mother and with no female point of reference in the underworld upon which to construct and relate her womanly identity, Persephone will have to pave her own path of self-assertion.

Italian American women's memoirs often originate from a condition of discomfort perceived by the authors. Their struggles in relation to their Italian American hybrid identity lie at the core of their stories which unfold a narrative of the quest for roots. As Gardaphé argues, what is crucial for Italian American writers is their attempt at recreating and establishing 'a connection with [their] Italian ancestry'.⁶⁶ Consequently, these authors' narratives begin with a departure from the American scene; this is a journey – either physical or metaphorical – to the land of their ancestors, aimed to explore their Italian identity and to answer to the question: 'Was I Italian because my name sounded strange, or was I American because I was born here?'.⁶⁷ With regard to the issue of identity, Zygmunt Bauman explains:

To be wholly or in part 'out of place' everywhere, not being completely anywhere ... may be an upsetting, sometimes annoying experience. There is always something to

⁶⁶ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 86.

⁶⁷ Barolini as quoted in Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 89.

explain, to apologize for, to hide or on the contrary to boldly display, to negotiate, to bid for and to bargain for...⁶⁸

This is the experience of Italian American women who have too often perceived their identity as something to figure out, to negotiate, something that makes them stand out, and is always a marker of difference in the eyes of the other, holding them back from personal achievement. In most of the cases, this sense of insecurity comes from their very own Italian community and is instilled in them from their families. For instance, in her memoir, Diane di Prima remembers her father's words:

The week I was leaving for college, my father turned to me [...] Held me by the shoulder [...]: 'Now, don't expect too much. I want you to always remember that you're Italian'. Not that we weren't as good, but however good we were, we would be held down. Or back. An underclass.⁶⁹

Like modern Persephones, these women venture into the realm of darkness to shed light on a daunting past, to create a different narrative for their stories, and to be able to achieve independence and selfhood, an identity other than 'underclass'.

Like the earth opening wide beneath Persephone's feet to create a passage in order for Persephone to travel between her joyful and familiar world of light and the dark, mysterious kingdom of the husband – her new home – Italian American women experience a similar condition of displacement that begins with a moment of fracture cracking the shell of their hybrid identity. This moment could be summed up by DeSalvo's declaration of intents in the prologue of her memoir, *Vertigo*:

⁶⁸ Zigmunt Bauman, *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2013), p. 13.

⁶⁹ Diane Di Prima, *Recollections of my Life as a Woman* (New York: Viking, 2001), p. 72.

I am, inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working class. I come from a people, who, even now, seriously distrust educated women, who value family loyalty. The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (and am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was scripted for me by my culture [...] It is the unlikely narrative of how a working-class Italian girl became a critic and writer.⁷⁰

From these lines, we can see how distrust in education, the family, and the Italian American community in which these writers were raised, underpin the difficult ascension and affirmation of an Italian American literature written by women. This is due to the fact that these very same factors, indeed, contributed forms of anxiety that prevented these women from knowing themselves and their potential as historical and political agents. The resistance towards the educational system in America that characterized earlier generations of Italian migrants can be attributed to the racism these people found in the host country, as well as to the exploitation of the Italian people by American society. According to Barolini:

When your frame of reference is a deep distrust of education because it is an attribute of the very classes who have exploited you and your kinds for as long as memory carries, then you do not encourage a reverence for books among your children. You teach them the practical arts not the abstracts ones.⁷¹

Further evidence can be found in Marianna De Marco Torgovnick's memoir, *Crossing Ocean Parkway* (1994). Torgovnick writes about a moment in her school career when she wanted to pursue her studies but had to fight against both her parents and the school advisor. The school advisor recommended that the girl pursue the secretarial track rather

⁷⁰ DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, p. xvii.

⁷¹ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 5.

than the academic one. This decision, Torgovnick argues, was based solely on her ethnic Italian background – an experience that echoes the abovementioned Di Prima’s story. Torgovnick’s parents agreed with the school advisor and pushed the daughter to conform to the idea that it was the right thing to do. Torgovnick, however, managed to convince her parents to change their minds by appealing on the fact that if she was a Jewish girl ‘I would have been placed, without question, in the academic track’.⁷²

Starting from rebellion and thus creating friction between the opposing value systems that they had to live by, Italian American women enact strategies of resistance signalling a turn in their future. Choosing education over a worn-out script, Italian American women are seeking individuality and intellectual freedom – elements of fracture from their Italian heritage, and the idea of the Italian woman as mere ‘helpmate, mother of their children, bearer and tender of the old culture’.⁷³ Following this moment of departure, the journey takes shape as one of self-discovery and self-definition during which Italian American women learn to know themselves, to know each other, and to create a literary space that can best represent their experience.

7. A journey in the dark realm of memory

‘Literature gives us ourselves’,⁷⁴ Barolini writes. The lack of acknowledgement of Italian American women writers by literary critics made it strenuous for these women to establish a dialogue, to share their experiences among themselves first, and with a

⁷² Marianna De Marco Torgovnick, *Crossing Ocean Parkway* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 14.

⁷³ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 5.

⁷⁴ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 47.

broader audience after, and, therefore, to gain literary affirmation because ‘when you don’t read, you don’t write’.⁷⁵

Among the feminist currents of thought, Virginia Woolf was a pivotal figure in arguing that it was vital for women to be able to access culture and to have a space for themselves in order to express their creativity, and to reveal and discover their identity in and through their art. It is no surprise, then, that several Italian American women have turned to Woolf as a literary frame of reference. The very same Woolf, born to Sir Leslie Stephen, historiographer and critic, and one of the most influential men during the Victorian age, therefore brought up in a highly educated and polished environment, suffered a great deal in seeing herself denied the possibility to attend Cambridge University – an opportunity that was conversely offered to her brother, Thoby. Barolini herself had to live with the disappointment of not being able to develop her independent career as a writer as she lived in the shadow of her husband, the Italian poet Antonio Barolini. Barolini’s literary endeavours have, for a long time, consisted mostly of the translation of Antonio Barolini’s works. Barolini started her career speaking through the words of her husband. Her effort to compile *The Dream Book* was, therefore, a personal and political act, an act of redemption for herself and for her fellow sister writers silenced by the lack of attention paid to them by literary critics. As Barolini argues: ‘If her voice remained silent to the larger culture, it is because no established critic or reviewer amplified it.’⁷⁶

Literature as a means to read one’s life and as a space for recreating and coming to terms with one’s identity emerges also from DeSalvo’s memoir. DeSalvo, herself an established Woolf scholar, writes: ‘Can it be that concentrating on Woolf’s health, I am

⁷⁵ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 5.

⁷⁶ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. x.

also trying to fix whatever is wrong with me?’⁷⁷ and again, further, she concludes: ‘She has been very good to me, this woman. And, in time, it is through her life that I begin to understand the lives of the women in my family – my mother’s, my sister’s. And finally, mine.’⁷⁸

The journey of self-discovery includes the search for the mother, the sister, female correspondents in the family, mythical female archetypes to come to terms with one’s own female identity and a way to be, to exist independently from them. In their writings, these women rework their families and focus on other female characters who gravitate around their own: their ancestors, their grandmothers, mothers, sisters, as well as female characters not belonging to the family but who, nonetheless, have played a role in the process of these women’s identity construction. And through the act of writing, they develop their ‘way of not being my mother, of not being my sister’.⁷⁹ As Annis Pratt argues in ‘Demeter, Persephone, and the Pedagogy of Archetypal Empowerment’, it is important for a woman to understand where she stands in relation to her female ancestors in order for her to be able to interiorize what is positive in relation to her female predecessors. At the same time, it is essential to ‘repudiate their patriarchal fetters, then absorb without letting it destroy us their rage against these limitations’.⁸⁰ Once she is thus able to negotiate the old with the new, the daughter can develop her individual identity, which is separate from that of her mother and ancestors, but one which can still carry the traces of these women, who covertly or overtly, have entered the process of identity construction. For Italian American women writers it is important

⁷⁷ DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, p. 234.

⁷⁸ DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, p. 241.

⁷⁹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 2011), p. 161.

⁸⁰ Annis Pratt, ‘Demeter, Persephone, and the Pedagogy of Archetypal Empowerment’, in *The Long Journey Home: Re-Visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone for our Time*, ed. by Christine Downing (Boston: Shambala, 1994), pp. 146–54 (p. 152).

to break into fragments and recompose the images of other Italian American women. This need originates from the fact that Italian American women have often been equated with stasis and domesticity. To redeem this idea, Italian American women writers give voice not only to their own stories, but also to the stories of their mothers and grandmothers, and to those of the women who came before them and whom they never met. The question is, how do these women writers reconstruct their past, their memories through writing? How does writing help them to overcome their feeling of being trapped in a life already written for them?

In writing their stories and memories, Italian American women do not engage with nostalgia in order to make events and people look good or pleasant. Like modern Persephones, adjusting to the obscurity of Hades' kingdom, Italian American women writers have to journey through and become acquainted with the dark space of memory. This is a land where they bravely encounter trauma, pain, and loss. Italian American writers travel through their families' stories, which are also their own, in order to bring these stories into light. And they do so in an unconventional way. For instance, DeSalvo tells us of her mother's and sister's suicides, Mary Cappello writes about her mother's agoraphobia, Domenica Ruta portrays her mother's drug addiction, Maria Laurino tells of her disabled brother, Susan Caperna Lloyd uncovers stories of depression and death among her family members, Joanna Clapps Herman writes about her uncle's suicide and her grandmother's mental illness, Kym Ragusa tells of her father's struggle with HIV, the violence in the Bronx, and episodes of domestic violence, and the list goes on.⁸¹

⁸¹ DeSalvo, *Vertigo*; Mary Cappello, *Night Bloom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Domenica Ruta, *With or Without You: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013); Susan Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (San Francisco: Mercury, 1992); Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*; Kym Ragusa, *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* (New York: Norton, 2006). For further reference to the writings of Italian American women and the employment of the myth of Persephone see Goeller; Giunta, 'Persephone's Daughters'; Giunta, *Writing with an Accent*.

Through their writings, therefore, Italian American women actually break their Italian families' codes of behaviour, values, and beliefs inherited from their parents and grandparents. Specifically, I refer to the code of *omertá*, the silence that protects 'family business' from 'outsiders'. Marie Saccomando Coppola writes, for instance, that after publishing the story of her grandmother's life in Italy, she was seen as a traitor by her Italian relatives who stopped considering Saccomando Coppola as 'one of them'. Choosing to write about – and publish – personal and family secrets makes the author's and her family's stories available for everyone to read. Although, in a memoir, the author can change names to protect the identity of the people narrated, even if never mentioned, as Torgovnick highlights, your parents will always be your parents; there is no way to protect their privacy if you decide to write about their lives.⁸² The source of these women writers' creativity lies in the stories recollected from their relatives' memories, and transferred orally through generations. These memories are then used to challenge the set of patriarchal rules that governs their families.

Italian American writings respond to the change hoped for by women like Maria Barbieri and Maria Roda – women anarchists who participated in the labour movement during the late nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries in Italy and in the United States. In her essay 'We Must Rebel!' Barbieri urged her women comrades to stand up for themselves. Opening the essay with an invitation 'to my women comrades', Barbieri writes: 'It is necessary that we cast off these servile chains that the family, society, and church have forced us to drag from remote centuries.'⁸³ Roda, almost ten

⁸² Torgovnick, p. 175.

⁸³ Maria Barbieri, 'We Must Rebel!', in *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jennifer Gillan, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Edvige Giunta (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 85–86 (trans. by Edvige Giunta and Jennifer Guglielmo from the Italian-language 'anarchist-socialist' newspaper *La Questione Sociale*, 18 November 1905)(p. 85).

years before Barbieri, was actively involved in the fight for women's rights and emancipation. In her essay 'To the Women Workers' Roda invites her fellow women to

prove to the world that accuses us that we too are capable of something, let this be known to the men who stifle our will, who do not allow us to use our minds, and act according to our natural impulses, those who consider us to be inferior and impose on us their authority as fathers, brothers, and husbands, those who believe themselves to be stronger, while they step on and oppress us. Sometimes their violent hands slap us, and because we are weaker, we have to subject ourselves to this. They also use us as objects for their pleasure, but we too want to enjoy our rights and our liberties. ...What you men don't realize is that you are the only ones responsible for our weakness, for our inadequate intellectual development, because you alone forbid us education.⁸⁴

Writing a memoir, therefore, enables Italian American women to continue the works of the women before them and to make these works visible. They attract attention to what cannot be silenced anymore, which is their own individual stories and a collective narrative.

8. Persephone returns: the power of writing

Following the journey in the underworld as the place of discovery and self-assertion, Italian American women return to their lives empowered by the writing process. The act of writing has enabled these women to weave and make their own narratives meaningful. This is a crucial step in Italian American literature as, through their memoirs, these women have started to acknowledge their stories do not exist as isolated, but echo each

⁸⁴ Maria Roda, 'To the Women Workers', in *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jennifer Gillan, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Edvige Giunta (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 87–8. (trans. by Edvige Giunta and Jennifer Guglielmo from the Italian-language "anarchist-socialist" newspaper *La Questione Sociale*, 15 September 1897) (p. 87).

other. In an interview Bona has stressed that Italian American writers' stories relate to each other. The recurrent presence of similar story patterns allows for an establishment of a dialogue between the authors themselves. Bona argues that

those resonances suggest something about what the authors were trying to say about how storytelling itself can be healing, liberatory, and can be resistant all the way from the beginning of the literary tradition, which, really, pretty much begins in the 1880's with the political writers who came [to America] all the way through the millennium.⁸⁵

Italian American women's writing is 'healing and liberatory' as these women manage to overcome what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have defined 'anxiety of authorship'. This is the condition experienced by the woman who 'fears that she cannot create, that because she can never become a "precursor" the act of writing will isolate or destroy her'.⁸⁶ In this sense, the act of writing is a radical choice; nonetheless, one they have to make in order to shape their voice and make it heard. Through the reading and the understanding of each other's works, these authors, then, establish an enduring literary sisterhood. They are like Demeter and Persephone recalling the bitter memory of the daughter's abduction:

Then all day long, their minds at one, they soothed
each other's heart and soul in many ways, embracing fondly, and their spirits abandoned
grief,
as they gave and received joy between them.⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Mary Jo Bona, 'Italian America: An Interview with Mary Jo Bona', interview with Harvard, 22 March 2012, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=seYz7vHgad8>>.

⁸⁶ Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 49.

⁸⁷ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, lines 434–37, p. 24.

It is interesting to note that Gilbert and Gubar have placed Dante Gabriel Rossetti's *Astarte Syriaca* as an opening illustration to their book.



Figure 3 - *Astarte Syriaca*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1887)

The painting is known as *Mnemosyne*,⁸⁸ the Greek personification of memory. The pre-Raphaelite depiction, although showing an image different from the innocent girl,

⁸⁸ Evelyn Waugh, *Rossetti: His Life and Works* (London: Duckworth, 1975), p. 193.

the ‘angel in the house’, a naïve child-like Persephone, is still a representation of the goddess filtered through the male gaze, an ‘object to be gazed upon by painter and spectator’.⁸⁹

Italian American women authors make mythological images of stillness and muteness change. They do so by documenting their narratives in which their own story is intertwined with their family’s stories, the collective memory of their Italian American community of belonging, and the American society at large. The myth of Persephone in their memoirs empowers them to embark on a physical – spatial and temporal – journey to return to their ancestors’ homeland, Italy. Therefore, the myth becomes the propellant force that triggers the recovery of memory. Moreover, the myth of Persephone plays an important role as it helps the authors to break their condition of stasis and domesticity which characterizes the history of Italian American women. The myth, that is, has at times encouraged the authors to embark on a physical quest for roots to the Mediterranean. Thus, to study how the myth nestles in the literary creative process of Italian American literature – memoir writing in our case – means also to explore issues of gender and mobility, as the following section will illustrate by briefly looking at the relationship between travel and Italian American women.

9. Travel and myth

Travel, more often than not, has been a typically male experience. Men, in fact, as Susan Bassnett puts it, move ‘freely in the public sphere’, whereas women embody ‘the

⁸⁹ Jan Marsh, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisterhood* (London,: Quartet Books, 1985), p. 1.

objects of desire or destination points rather than active co-travellers'.⁹⁰ In relation to Italian American women, it is not uncommon to identify the trope of the woman travelling on her own as an unconventional or even scandalous thing to be done. Italian American women have too often been subject to the stereotype of the angel in the house and the mother in the kitchen. They were not expected to travel or to do anything which might be considered a threat to the safety of the domestic family life. In her memoir *Vertigo*, DeSalvo tackles this issue in an unflinching way when she says that an Italian American woman who travels on her own is addressed as a *puttana*, a whore. DeSalvo seems to have appropriated Woolf's argument articulated in 'Professions for Women' according to which a woman has to 'kill the angel in the house' and carry out the 'aggressive act of truth-telling from a woman's experiences'.⁹¹ The employment of a vulgar word such as *puttana*, in fact, is a weapon DeSalvo aims at a tradition that has, for centuries, induced Italian American women to obey suffocating and patriarchal rules. DeSalvo writes:

THE YEAR IS 1975.

I am a thirty-two years old, married, the mother of two children, a Ph.D candidate, on a charter flight to England with a friend to do research on Virginia Woolf at the University of Sussex in Falmer. This is the first time in my whole life that I am going away by myself. [...] I come from a family, from a cultural heritage, where women don't go away to do things separately from men. That is not to say that men don't go away to do things separately from women. They do. And often. But in the land of my forebears, women sit around and wait for their men. Or they work very hard and watch their children and wait for their men. Or they make a sumptuous meal and they work very hard and watch their children and wait for their men. *But don't go anywhere without their men.* [...] Oh yes, I now

⁹⁰ Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender', in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 225–41 (p. 225).

⁹¹ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, 'The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser', in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, ed. by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 280–300 (p. 284).

remember what women who do anything without their husbands are called.
Puttana. Whores.⁹²

In Tony Ardizzone's *In The Garden of Papa Santuzzu* – a fictional book that heavily draws on the oral tradition of storytelling characterising the author's family – we can find another example of the stigma attached to a woman travelling on her own.⁹³ Reporting the strict mores of behaviour carried out in Sicily, one of the female characters, Teresa, says:

Departure was my only option, disguise my only way out. A girl traveling alone was viewed as damaged goods, a cracked or broken vessel, abandoned and deserving of shame. [...] It was unthinkable for an unmarried girl to live apart from her family. A girl without family was considered as having no value or worth. Where was her father, her brothers, her uncles? [...] Put crudely, she was a *buttana*, little more than the devils' own dirty slut.⁹⁴

Similarly to DeSalvo and Teresa, in an interview I carried out with Caperna Lloyd, the author addressed the burden of the label assigned by society to a woman who travels on her own. She stated she struggled very hard to fit in the Sicilian community while she was travelling there without her husband. She said: 'I had to really watch it that going to Sicily and doing all that stuff I didn't come across as a *puttana*, a whore. That was the biggest problem.'⁹⁵

Things, however, have been changing – as Caperna Lloyd also underlined during the interview – and women have appropriated the experience of travel through the use of airplanes, trains, and cars. Since access to new technological means of

⁹² DeSalvo, *Vertigo*, p. 220.

⁹³ See Cristina Bevilacqua and Tony Ardizzone, 'Interview with Tony Ardizzone', *Italian Americana*, 19.2 (2001), 207–13.

⁹⁴ Tony Ardizzone, *In The Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (New York: Picador, 1999), p. 54.

⁹⁵ Skype interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd carried out on 24 March 2014. See appendix p.252.

transport has become easier, more and more women have begun to travel on their own. This has contributed to redefining the concept of travel as a typically male privilege.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, in some Italian American women's accounts of their journeys, we can still find traces of the anxiety in relation to the idea of travelling on one's own. In *No Pictures in my Grave*, Caperna Lloyd describes herself as 'an *oddity* and slightly *suspect* for having travelled to Trapani alone' (italics mine).⁹⁷ Ragusa opens *The Skin between Us* with her trip on the ferry from Calabria to Messina. She is standing on the deck of the ferry she is travelling on and writes of the other passengers giving her a 'disapproving glance'. These feelings of uneasiness are translated into the question Ragusa asks herself: 'What must have I looked like to them? A woman alone, already an *oddity*. Already *suspect*' (italics mine).⁹⁸ Caperna Lloyd's memoir was published in 1992 while Ragusa's in 2006. Interestingly enough, although written at fourteen years' distance, both authors still define themselves in the same words: an oddity and suspect. The reader, however, can only wonder whether this definition of themselves as an odd and suspect traveller to the others' gaze is true or, indeed, just a projection of what the authors perceive. It is unquestionable that these women have been paying for their heritage of belonging to a tradition where women were not supposed to seek individual goals, least of all thinking to be able to travel without being escorted by a man. The tension and anxiety caused by the role assigned to Italian American women by society is exemplified by Barolini when she says that: 'Italian American women were taught to keep out of public view: don't step out of line and be noticed, don't be the envy of

⁹⁶ For a discussion of how new technologies have changed the relationship between women and travel see Sidonie Smith, *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁹⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 93.

⁹⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, pp. 17–18.

others, don't attract the jealous fates who will punish success.'⁹⁹ These women were expected to lead a domestic life and to pass on the values of the tradition they epitomize. Despite all the odds, Italian American women battled against the destiny of domesticity thrust upon them. That these women have inherited and/or been exposed to a tradition of physical immobility and fixity can be noted in the way both Italian and Italian American contemporary authors have responded to it.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that 'because historically the spirit of inspiration, the muse, has been gendered as feminine, and the creator of art or literature has been gendered male, it has been important for women to reimagine Greek and Roman myth for their own purposes'.¹⁰⁰ In their attempts at gaining individuality and independence, Italian and Italian American women have challenged the stereotypical monolithic image of themselves through the appropriation of female mythical figures typically immobile and/or subject to patriarchal rules. It is not unusual, thus, to come across revisited stories of mythical Medea, Penelope, and Persephone.¹⁰¹ On the Italian side, for instance, Silvana La Spina together with Luigi Malerba rewrites the figure of Penelope.¹⁰² Malerba's *Itaca per Sempre* tells the story of the moment in which Penelope and Ulysses meet again after ten years. *Itaca per Sempre*'s genesis is indebted to Malerba's wife's provocative suggestion.¹⁰³ According to the original story, as

⁹⁹ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 27.

¹⁰⁰ Gilbert and Gubar, 'The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English, revd edn (New York and London: Norton, 2007), I. Available online at <<http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nalw/welcome.aspx>> <<http://www.wwnorton.com/college/english/nalw/topics/top6/overview.aspx>>.

¹⁰¹ On the issue of gender and travel writing through the questioning of Penelope's fixity, see Karen L. Lawrence, *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994). Also, Cinzia Sartini Blum engages with the revision of the myth of Gradive to tackle issues of gender, mobility, and migration in contemporary Italian literature and in the Italian literature of migration. Cinzia Sartini Blum, *Rewriting the Journey in Contemporary Italian Literature: Figures of Subjectivity in Progress* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

¹⁰² Silvana La Spina, *Penelope* (Milano: La Tartaruga, 1998); Luigi Malerba, *Itaca per Sempre* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997).

¹⁰³ It is not possible to provide Malerba's wife's name as it is never mentioned by the author.

recounted by Homer, in fact, Penelope seems to be the only one who did not recognize Ulysses when he appeared in Ithaca disguised as a beggar. Malerba's wife, however, from a female point of view, suggested that Penelope actually did recognize the husband. Nonetheless, she decided not to say anything in order to string Ulysses along and make him 'pay' for the lack of trust he had shown to her when he decided to hide his identity from her but not from their son and the nurse Eurycleas.¹⁰⁴ The interpretation of Malerba's wife entitles Penelope to her voice. We can see how Penelope, who, in the original story, had been relentlessly waiting, for years and years, for her man to return, and whose feelings as a woman have been kept hidden from the readers, can finally talk back. Malerba's story, eventually, ends with Penelope's forgiving Ulysses in the name of marriage and with her desires to leave Ithaca and to travel:

E perché mai, ho pensato, non dovrei fare anch'io qualche bel viaggio? [...] chiederò a Ulisse di portarmi in Egitto. [...] da quando mi sono sposata non sono mai uscita da Itaca, come da una prigione. Per caso solo gli uomini hanno diritto di viaggiare?¹⁰⁵

(And why is it, I thought, that I should not be allowed to travel as well? [...] I will ask Ulysses to take me to Egypt. [...] Since I got married I have never left Ithaca, as if I were in prison. Are only men given the right to travel?)

If Malerba makes Penelope dream of travel, La Spina dares further. In her story, in fact, Penelope, together with Eurycleas, becomes a modern traveller. Tired of Odysseus's lies and the male violence she was subject to in her own house, Penelope simply leaves. La Spina's novel is a form of denunciation of violence towards women. Penelope's revisited story aims to suggest new perspectives on the mother-child bond. At once, it challenges the notion of motherhood informed by the Catholic tradition

¹⁰⁴ See Malerba, p. 184.

¹⁰⁵ Malerba, p. 175 (translation is mine).

according to which women are equalled to the sorrowful Virgin mother.¹⁰⁶

With regard to the relationship between women and violence, Italian American author Josephine Gattuso Hendin turns to the mythological figures of Medea and Persephone in her critical work *Heartbreakers*.¹⁰⁷ Analysing domestic spaces like the bedroom and the kitchen – traditionally acknowledged as feminine and romanticized spaces – Gattuso Hendin undermines the ivory tower in which ideals of innocence and grace as engendered female are kept. In so doing, ‘Hendin demonstrates how retaliatory violence is a form of self-affirmation and an inversion of the myth of Persephone, who epitomized passivity and purity.’¹⁰⁸

In her essay ‘Persephone Goes Home’, Alison Goeller brings together the notion of travel and the myth of Persephone in her critical analysis of Italian American women’s writings.¹⁰⁹ In Goeller’s essay, Italian American women of different generations are pooled around the image of the goddess Persephone. The scholar’s choice to turn to this mythic figure originates from the fact that:

The myth can be used as another metaphorical device for analysing the acculturation process Italian American women have experienced and also as a rite of passage as the daughter makes the necessary break from her culture of birth,

¹⁰⁶ For a further study on Malerba and La Spina’s works, see Lisa Kathleen Pike-Fiorindi, ‘Penelope Speaks: Making the Mythic Specific in the Works of Five Contemporary Caribbean and Italian Writers – Lorna Goodison, Juana Rosa Pita, Derek Walcott, Silvana La Spina and Luigi Malerba’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Toronto, 2008); Domenica Perrone, *La Memoria Dilatata: Scritture del Contemporaneo* (Acireale: Bonanno, 2006). In relation to Silvana La Spina, see also Donatella La Monaca who compiled the entry ‘Silvana La Spina’ in *Storia della Sicilia. Pensiero e Cultura Letteraria dell’Ottocento e del Novecento*, 11 vols (Roma: Editalia, 2000), VIII, ed. by Natale Tedesco, pp. 479–82.

¹⁰⁷ Josephine Gattuso Hendin, *Heartbreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2004).

¹⁰⁸ Mary Jo Bona, ‘Heartbreakers: Women and Violence in Contemporary Culture and Literature (review)’, *NWSA Journal*, 18.2 (2006), 248–50 (p. 249). This is not the first time Gattuso Hendin employs Greek mythology to attack the hierarchical and patriarchal rules which condemn women to be second to men and to serve only the ideal of family. See her novel *The Right Thing to Do*, in which Gattuso Hendin employs the myth of Persephone to portray the father-daughter bond in an Italian American family. Josephine Gattuso Hendin, *The Right Thing to Do* (New York: Feminist Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁹ Goeller.

represented by Demeter, and back again, forging her path to becoming her own woman.¹¹⁰

Persephone, in fact, is the forerunner of both the traveller and the migrant. She is doomed to journey back and forth from one world to another, and to learn to adjust to these different realms. In this sense, the myth becomes symbolic of Italian American women's journeys – both physical and metaphorical – between America and their ancestors' homeland, Italy.

Bona argues that 'the underexamined literary tradition of Italian American women calls for critics of American/ethnic literature to examine how the Italian American woman's cultural background is manifested in narratives that explore the ethnic woman's struggle to develop an empowering sense of self [...]'.¹¹¹ Because the way Italian American women authors resurrect the narrative of the myth of Persephone is also a mode to reconnect themselves with their ancestral roots, it can be argued that to investigate how the myth enters Italian American women's memoirs can help us to shed light on the journey of self-discovery and quest for selfhood which must cut across these women's process of hybrid identity construction. In particular, Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman belong to that group of writers who rework, and rewrite the myth as it '[...] is the history of our inability to authenticate our knowledge of being against this experience in order to attain a sense of self or freedom'.¹¹² At the same time, however, the way women rewrite and reread myths proves how they challenge and possibly subvert such inability. From their experiences as a wandering Persephone in

¹¹⁰ Goeller, p. 76.

¹¹¹ Mary Jo Bona, 'Broken Images, Broken Lives: Carmolina's Journey in Tina De Rosa's Paper Fish', *Melus*, 14.3-4 (Fall-Winter 1987), 87-106 (p. 90).

¹¹² Estella Lauter, *Women as Mythmakers: Poetry and Visual Art by Twentieth-Century Women* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 209.

the realm of memory, Italian American women have gained a better understanding of their condition as women in relation to the other female characters of their families and the historical condition of their people through the process of migration from Italy and acculturation to the American world. They have understood the power that springs from the written word that they can now produce. They have learnt that ‘if you don’t speak you die’.¹¹³

10. Conclusion

Memoir is a genre whose identity is fluid and in continuous movement. This corresponds to its purpose to provide a possible writerly space for memory. Memory, however, *flows* like a stream and, if one can never step into the same river twice, memory cannot reproduce itself without changing and producing changes in the life of the individual. The protean quality of memory confers upon memoir its dynamic nature. Italian American women authors find in the memoir a means to self-represent themselves as hybrid subjects leveraging ‘the cohesion of myth and literature’ as discussed by Rainer.¹¹⁴

If, as this chapter has investigated, autobiography originates from a position of self-insurance, and is perceived as authoritative by the reader, the subjects who turn to memoir to spin their personal narrative look for a literary expression that could offer them a way to explore the reasons for their lack of such self-insurance. The memoir shows us exactly how the writing subject is working on herself to come to terms with

¹¹³ Edvige Giunta, ‘St. Therese’, in *Italian American Writers on New Jersey: An Anthology of Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Jennifer Gillan, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Edvige Giunta (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), pp. 149–50 (p. 149).

¹¹⁴ Rainer, p. 10.

the difficulties experienced in life. In particular, we have seen that the employment of the myth of Persephone enacts a process of appropriation of collective memory in Italian American women's writings that serves to bridge the individual and the community. 'No more masks! No more mythologies!' writes Muriel Rukeyser in *The Poem as Mask*. Although this statement seems to ban mythology, 'the refusal is an enabling act, and "for the first time" the myth is alive'.¹¹⁵ Italian American women craft their memoirs by retrieving collective memories and mythologies handed down to them by their families through orality. The writing, then, as Desalvo argues, is a healing practice able to transform our lives.¹¹⁶ Combining knowledge from the past, inscribed in the myth, and their present reality as Italian American women brought up in America, these authors look for possible ways to reconcile these two opposing spheres and to make the kingdom of Persephone, symbolic of the kingdom of memory, their site of understanding. As Barbara Grizzuti Harrison writes in her memoir: 'Once one begins to understand, one begins to forgive, and once one begins to forgive there is no end, one rewrites the story [...]'.¹¹⁷

In the next chapter, I will analyse Caperna Lloyd's travel memoir *No Pictures in my Grave*, to explore the author's quest for selfhood through writing and physical adventure. In Caperna Lloyd's memoir, mobility, discussed in relation to myth and memory, becomes a particularly important means of resistance challenging the fossilized and anachronistic image of the static and fixed Italian American woman.

¹¹⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, p. 293.

¹¹⁶ DeSalvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing*.

¹¹⁷ Barbara Grizzuti Harrison, *Italian Days* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989), p. 365.

Chapter 2

Routes and Roots of Empowerment in *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* by Susan Caperna Lloyd

In ‘Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory’, Michael M. J. Fischer argues that ‘ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation [...] and is often [...] puzzling to the individual’.¹ The travel writing memoir *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992) by Susan Caperna Lloyd exemplifies Fischer’s argument. In her book, Caperna Lloyd turns to the yearly Easter Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani, Sicily, and the myth of Demeter and Persephone to reinvent and (re)discover her ethnic roots. The myth and the Procession offer Caperna Lloyd a way to reconcile with the memory of her Italian grandmother, Carolina. These moments enable the author to come to terms with her conflicting feelings about ‘family’. This is explained by the author as she writes:

Carolina had been a strong influence during my childhood, and understanding her and the meaning of “family” had become my obsession. In America, though my dad’s Italian mores upset me at times, I was fascinated by our ties. I battled against his expectations of me, yet I felt compelled to search his family out, even to the Mediterranean.²

This excavation into the past of her family pervades other works of Caperna Lloyd’s.

Two of her most recent documentaries are *The Family Baggage* (2001) and *Between*

¹ Michael M. J. Fischer, ‘Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory’, in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* ed. by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 194–233 (p. 195). See also Fischer, ‘Ethnicity as Text and Model’, p. 176.

² Susan Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, pp. 5–6.

Two Worlds (1994). *The Family Baggage* is about the death of the filmmaker's sister, who died a tragic and sudden death in her early forties. The movie opens with the question: 'Do all of us, children of immigrants, still carry our forebears' "baggage" full of hope, pain, loss, memories, and old-world ways which create conflict in the modern American family?' Following this opening line, Caperna Lloyd documents the ways in which the migration experience has impacted her family. Most of the family members, as she reports, have inherited forms of anxiety due to the emotional baggage passed down to them from their grandmother Carolina and their father who crossed the ocean in 1922 to seek fortune in North America. Starting as a temporary emigration, the Capernas never returned to Italy and permanently settled in Oregon.

The documentary *Between Two Worlds* is, instead, focused on spirituality. The movie was produced in collaboration with Joanne Hershfield (chair of the Women's and Gender Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) and awarded the Association for Asian Studies honoree, and the National Educational Film Festival Award. This documentary examines the pilgrimage to the Japanese island of Shikoku. Alternating the words of Kobo Daishi – founder of the Buddhism's Shingon sect in the ninth century – to contemporary images of the pilgrimage, the film raises provocative questions about the reasons and the meaning why people from all over the world still undertake this type of journey today. At the end of the sacred route – known as 'Pilgrimage to the 88 Sacred Places of Shikoku', leading to the pilgrims' spiritual renewal, the author asks: 'Does a journey really ever end?'

These two works, produced after the author's spiritual encounter in Sicily, testify to Caperna Lloyd's constant reflections on migration and travel as experiences of discovery of one's own self and of the other. Caperna Lloyd made four trips to Sicily

and in 1989 shot the documentary *Processione: A Sicilian Easter*.³ This video films the 400-year-old tradition of Trapani's Easter Procession, known also as 'Procession of the Mysteries', which begins on Good Friday and lasts for 24 hours. A blend of pagan and Christian symbols, the Procession is performed by the men from Trapani. They act as *portatori*, carriers, and bring around the whole town several different *ceti* – platforms onto which one-ton statues depicting the Stations of the Cross are displayed. The last *ceto* is the most important one, upon which the statue of the dark Madonna of Sorrows, searching for her son, stands tall. The statue of the Madonna mirrors the Greek deity Demeter and her desperate search for her daughter Persephone, abducted by Hades. Caperna Lloyd's film has won top awards at the American Film Festival and the National Educational Film and Video festival. This film also inspired her writing of *No Pictures in my Grave*, published in 1992.

This chapter explores the author's employment of the myth of Persephone and the Procession of the Mysteries to refabricate her Italian American upbringing through the recovery of the memory of her Italian grandmother, Carolina. I first examine the genesis of the book and the reasons underpinning the writing. This will provide relevant background to understand how the author establishes her path of reconciliation with her Italian roots. Secondly, I focus on the event of the Easter Procession as a journey of collective and individual renewal. Recent critical interpretations of *No Pictures in my Grave* help us to define the memoir as a narrative which articulates the author's ethnicity through the inclusion of cultural memory, and as a narrative of empowerment through the appropriation of the image of the female deities discovered on the Sicilian island.⁴ These analyses prove that the myth of Demeter and Persephone is not employed

³ *Processione: A Sicilian Easter*, dir. by Susan Caperna Lloyd (University of California, 1989).

⁴ See Goeller; Giunta, *Writing with an Accent*; Mary Jo Bona, *By The Breath of Their Mouths*.

by the author to embellish the story; rather, it is the lifeblood of the text. The myth, then, grows and develops throughout the narrative along with the personal and spiritual maturation of the protagonist of the story, Susan. The discovery of the myth triggered the writing. At the same time, it was the necessity of writing that pushed Caperna Lloyd to travel to Sicily, and ultimately, to tell the story of Demeter and Persephone. As the myth takes shape through the writing, so does Susan's quest for selfhood; as the myth becomes a crossable threshold through which Susan can revisit her family past, she walks through it to explore her memories as a third-generation Italian American daughter, and finally defines her interpretation of family and community.

1. Writing travel and memories

No Pictures in my Grave is framed by a circular narrative structure and is divided into 11 chapters. Core to the story of the memoir is the author-protagonist's pilgrimage to Sicily, where the author travelled to film the yearly event of the Easter Procession. The Procession of the Mysteries becomes for Caperna Lloyd an occasion to explore her ethnicity through the reworking of her grandmother's painful past as a migrant in Oregon. As Giunta puts it, 'this memoir is a story about multiple journeys and discoveries rooted in the geographical and the spiritual, in history and myth.'⁵

In her essay about Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish*,⁶ Bona argues that:

Separated from their foremothers in Italy, Italian American women in America have perceived themselves to be writing in a void, without support from early models or from contemporary writers similarly concerned to legitimate the connection between ethnicity and literary canon.⁷

No Pictures in my Grave represents an important point of reference in Italian American literature in which the ancient myth of Persephone stands out as the *fil rouge* in the Italian American female literary tradition. Because the myth foregrounds basic themes relevant to women (for instance, motherhood, sisterhood, daughterhood, resistance against patriarchy, quest for independence), in these women authors' works, the myth of Persephone becomes a means for female empowerment and self-assertion. According to Fischer, from ethnic literature, it emerges that ethnicity is not 'taught or learned; [...] it can be potent even when not consciously taught' and it manifests 'in full – often

⁵ Giunta, *Writing with an Accent*, p. 98.

⁶ Tina De Rosa, *Paper Fish*, 1980, (New York: Feminist Press, 1996) with an afterword by Edvige Giunta.

⁷ Bona, 'Broken Images, Broken Lives', p. 90.

liberating – flower only through struggle’.⁸ Following Fischer’s argument, the myth, thus, seems to naturally develop in Italian American women’s writings for two main reasons: the first one is the universality of the female themes that emerge from the myth’s narrative; the second one lies in the geographical place of origin of the myth, which is the Mediterranean area – and Sicily in particular. Therefore, the myth of Persephone becomes a material channel of communication between Italian American women authors and their Italian ancestral roots. According to Gardaphé, the figures of immigrant grandparents ‘are central to the construction of narrative myths of origin’.⁹ To look at the ways in which immigrant grandparents are portrayed can help to understand the impact these depictions had on the process of the Italian identity construction enacted by the authors in their writings. In this sense we can see why and how the matrix of Caperna Lloyd’s ethnicity harks back to Carolina, the grandmother figure.

No Pictures in my Grave documents the author’s Sicilian experience through the use of individual and collective memory, as well as the inclusion of black and white pictures. These features contribute to the idea of travel writing as a genre that allows for ‘border crossing both literal and figurative’.¹⁰ To give an enclosed definition of travel writing is a difficult task as it is ‘so varied that it may not even be appropriate to describe it as a single genre’.¹¹ Nonetheless, in the last twenty years, critics have made numerous attempts at identifying the most common features of this kind of literature. In general, as Carl Thompson has more recently pointed out:

⁸ Fischer, ‘Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Art of Memory’, p. 195.

⁹ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121.

¹⁰ Michael Kowalewski, *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1992), p. 7.

¹¹ William H. Sherman, ‘Stirrings and Searchings (1500–1720)’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. by Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 17–36 (p.30).

Travel writing [...] is underpinned by, and emerges from, an encounter between self and other precipitated by moment. Consequently, all travel writing has a two-fold aspect. It is most obviously, of course, a report on the wider world, an account of an unfamiliar people or place. Yet it is also revelatory to a greater or lesser degree of the traveller who produced that report, and of his or her values, preoccupations and assumptions. And, by extension, it also reveals something of the culture from which that writer emerged, and/or the culture for which their text is intended.¹²

Travel writing bridges documentary narrative and personal experience, the encounter with the Other with the exploration of the Self. Travel writing offers a literary expression through which the traveller interprets and records what s/he saw and experienced during her/his journey. Travel narratives, then, hold the subversive potential to overturn the reader's expectations of distant and unfamiliar places and people. Travel writing is, also, revealing of the traveller's own culture and behaviour as it implies a certain degree of self-writing. The traveller and the Other (as presented in the narrative) are subjected to the scrutiny of the reader who is, in turn, asked to question her/his own lore and culture. This intersection of perspectives opens up questions about how differences (cultural, linguistic, class, race, gender, religion) interact. For Susan Bassnett:

Travel writers today are producing texts for an age characterised by increasing interest in concepts of hybridity, an age in which theories of race and ethnicity, once used as means of dividing peoples, are starting to crumble under the pressure of the millions in movement around the world. Once the gaze of the traveller reflected the singularity of a dominant culture; today, the gaze is more likely to be multi-focal, reflecting the demise of a world-view that separated *us*

¹² Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing: The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 10.

from *them*, and the role of women in adjusting perspectives is immense.¹³

In Caperna Lloyd's book the surfacing of differences, discrepancies, and cultural clashes raises questions about one's search for roots and cultural heritage and how these roots can be appropriated through the recovery of the past and memory. The notion of hybridity, and its potential as a space for literary creativity, also emerges through Caperna Lloyd's engagement with a genre that mixes autobiography and confessional narrative with descriptions of customs and people.¹⁴

According to Sara Mills, 'women's travel writing has frequently been labelled as "autobiographical"'. This is, however, a definition that has often tended to marginalize women's work by denying them 'the status of creators of cultural artefacts'¹⁵ and by attacking the veracity of their narratives.¹⁶ As Mills has argued, one of the problems we can identify in the label 'autobiographical' attached to women's travel writings is that the self is taken for granted, whereas it should be thought as a 'not coherent entity'.¹⁷ It can be argued that for Caperna Lloyd the autobiographical is indeed a source of creativity that assigns to her the 'status of creator of cultural artefacts'. In her book, the 'factual', the events reported should not interest us for their truthfulness or falsehood; rather, they have to be investigated in the way Caperna Lloyd articulates them. The author's writing conjugates her physical journey and her inward journey. This is an act of self-construction rather than a presentation of an already finished entity. The author's personal development is enacted when Caperna Lloyd looks back at the experience of

¹³ Susan Bassnett, 'Travel Writing and Gender', p. 240.

¹⁴ As a type of travel writing the travel memoir 'borrows freely from the memoir, journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and, most important, fiction'. Kowalewski, p. 7.

¹⁵ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 12.

¹⁶ Mills, p. 30.

¹⁷ Mills, p. 36.

the Procession and is able to create a connection between its symbols and her past memories as a third-generation Italian American raised in Oregon. Caperna Lloyd's memoir reveals how the experience of the journey and the experience of remembering that journey contributed to the author's metaphorical rebirth. Through the writing of her memoir she crafts her new self, thus proving how the autobiographical, rather than being sterile, serves the purpose to rework (and re-construct) the past.

By means of crossing literal and metaphorical borders, Caperna Lloyd's travel to Italy represents her endeavour to grapple with her hybrid identity. If the literal borders refer to the actual journey in Sicily, the metaphorical borders can refer to her exploration of her cultural roots in Italy, as a descendant of Italian immigrants.

During her trips to the Mediterranean island, Caperna Lloyd became more and more attracted by the history of Sicily, its traditions, and myths, which led her to revise her Italian American upbringing in Oregon. The exploration of the past takes place through the relationship Caperna Lloyd establishes with the myth of Demeter and Persephone she discovered in Sicily as a means of identification. This identification, however, is not an overlapping of images in which Caperna Lloyd mirrors herself in the figure of the goddesses; rather, it is with the part of the myth that tells of the grief of Demeter at the loss of her daughter Persephone. In this aspect of the myth, Caperna Lloyd reads the struggles of her paternal grandmother and the psychological consequences the migratory experience had for Carolina.

In order to analyse Caperna Lloyd's quest for her hybrid identity, as related to Carolina, we will now look at the genesis of *No Pictures in my Grave*. This will provide us with useful background to examine the implications of the author's journey in Sicily and to understand why the myth holds such an immense magnetic attraction for Caperna

Lloyd and her process of identity construction.

2. From *Return to the Mother* to *No Pictures In my Grave*: a title inversion

In 1983 Caperna Lloyd made her first trip to Sicily where she remained deeply fascinated with the Easter Procession. That time, however, the author was not aware of the relevance of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone on the island, and how this myth related to the Procession. It was her friend and history teacher at the University of Oregon, Barbara Corrado Pope, who told Caperna Lloyd about the similarities between Demeter's quest for Persephone and the search of the Madonna for Jesus on the day of the Procession. When Caperna Lloyd returned to the States after her sojourn in Sicily, she wrote an article about the Procession and sent it to a magazine. The editorial staff found the description of the event of particular interest and asked Caperna Lloyd to write more about this tradition.¹⁸ At that stage, however, the author was experiencing an emotional breakdown. In the grip of anxiety and panic attacks (also described in the memoir), Caperna Lloyd thought the only cure was to travel back to Sicily. This was further highlighted by Caperna Lloyd in my interview with the author:

I said: 'You know what? I'm going back to Sicily and look for Persephone and Demeter – 'cause now I knew the story and everything'. [...] I knew that that was just the beginning over there the first time in Sicily. The writing was pushing me, was telling me to go back there.¹⁹

¹⁸ This piece of information was given to me by Susan Caperna Lloyd during our interview (24 March 2014). See appendix, p. 263.

¹⁹ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 263.

In the memoir Caperna Lloyd also writes: ‘I knew how important the rituals I had seen in Sicily were. Now these rites, a part of my religious and cultural heritage, seemed crucial to my health.’²⁰ Caperna Lloyd refers to the Sicilian tradition and rituals as her own. The author’s Italian family, however, is native to Terracina, south of Rome. It is possible to observe how these brief lines foreground two important aspects that underpin the author’s memoir. The first one is the role of the Sicilian community in helping Caperna Lloyd to achieve a sense of wholeness and personal connection with her Italian roots. While participating in the yearly Easter event, Caperna Lloyd bonded with the women of the island. The author developed a strong attachment to these women as she was able to associate them with Carolina in many ways. Therefore, the possibility to relate to these female characters enabled Caperna Lloyd to better understand the enigmatic figure of the grandmother and the authority she exercised upon the author’s life throughout her childhood and young adolescence.

The second aspect is related to her appropriation of a culture and traditions, which Caperna Lloyd now claims as part of her own cultural heritage, as the quotation above seems to suggest. The process of appropriation can be further identified in her book:

The anxiety continued as I went to doctors who prescribed medications and talked about genetic disorders, to therapists, meditation classes, and physical therapy. I wondered if a session with a Sicilian healer wouldn’t cure me. But this was America; the peasant healers had long disappeared. For me, leaping on the bandwagon of pop therapy was not appealing, although the town where I lived offered ample opportunities: Sufi dancing, Tibetan meditation, Bach flower remedies, t’ai chi. But these therapies did not spring organically out of the American tradition, culture, or land; they seemed to me to be transported or

²⁰ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 91.

borrowed – attempts at easy solutions. Women’s groups were slightly more helpful, but goddess rituals in suburban America seemed incongruous. Where was the tradition passed down through generations that would sustain them and make them real?²¹

The urge to claim cultural and religious roots testifies to the fragility of the sense of identity the author experiences. In addition, it highlights how a liminal subject like Caperna Lloyd tries to compensate for this fragility through a process of idealizing and mythicization of roots.²² I employ the term “liminal subject” by drawing on the notion of liminality postulated by Turner. This is a condition of ‘no longer and not yet’ experienced by those subjects who cross the threshold, leveraging the creative potential the *limen* actuates. The threshold represents a zone in which the liminal subject who undergoes a rite of passage (the status of ‘no longer and not yet’ argued by Turner) has the power to negotiate the identity between the “preliminal” and “postliminal” conditions. It can be argued this process produces something analogous to the ‘third space’ postulated by Bhabha when he argues that the ‘third space’ is not the sum of two original moments that originate a third element. According to Bhabha, the ‘third space’ cannot be understood as a new identity on its own; this would not allow us to free ourselves of the ‘politics of polarity and cultural binarism’.²³ A ‘third space’, thus, does not produce a new identity; rather it puts in motion a process of identification. In this sense, it is a dimension that invites liminal subjects to develop a process of identity negotiation.

In *No Pictures in my Grave*, the ground for representation and negotiation is offered by the event of the Procession of the Mysteries, as well as the investigation of

²¹ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 91.

²² I am indebted to Professor Tiziana de Rogatis for this consideration.

²³ Rutherford, ‘Interview with Homi Bhabha’, (p. 211).

the myth of Demeter and Persephone in Sicily as connected to the event. As Caperna Lloyd writes:

I also began to write about my debilitating experiences; this writing and the process of nurturing my roots sustained me. Finally, [...] I planned another trip to Sicily at Eastertime. [...] I would continue study the myth of Demeter and Persephone and try again to meet and talk with Sicilian women.²⁴

The debilitating experiences are fruit of the anxiety suffered by Caperna Lloyd who struggled to make sense of the complexity of her hybrid identity. Central to the development of the author's healing is the reappropriation of her past underlined by her words: 'the process of nurturing my roots sustained me'. The roots refer to the figure of her grandmother Carolina. As the narrative of the memoir reveals, Caperna Lloyd's desire to go back to Sicily is triggered by the image of the statue of the dark Madonna of Sorrows as mirroring Carolina. Caperna Lloyd writes: 'I felt my own journey had just begun. I knew that I had to find the meaning of the dark Madonna's power, the power that Carolina and so many women had lost or relinquished – or had never had.'²⁵ The author, thus, links these two women on the basis of the similarities they share and which unfold on two levels: the first is the expression of pain attached to the role of the sorrowful mother; the second can be identified in the possibility of unearthing their stories and deconstructing their passivity. Starting from the memory of this epiphany, Caperna Lloyd decides to write a book-length travel memoir.

No Pictures in my Grave opens with a black and white picture of Carolina surrounded by her three children in Italy.

²⁴ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 91.

²⁵ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 28.



Figure 4 - Carolina Caperna and her children, Amelia, Romy, and Gino; Rome, 1922.²⁶

Caperna Lloyd follows the picture with an open letter to her grandmother. From this letter, we learn that when Carolina's husband, Antonio, died, she held him in her arms. According to the author's father, with her husband dying in her arms, Carolina looked like the *Pietà*: 'It was a damn *Pietà*. She was like some great Virgin [...] holding her son, Jesus.'²⁷ Carolina, thus, is from the very beginning compared (by the male son) to the image of the Madonna in her qualities of suffering and devotion to sacrifice. This is further reinforced by Caperna Lloyd when, addressing her grandmother in the letter, she writes: 'All your life you were a grieving Madonna and long suffering Mother.'²⁸ This

²⁶ Courtesy of Susan Caperna Lloyd.

²⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. ix.

²⁸ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. ix.

description by Caperna Lloyd depicting Carolina as a sorrowful Madonna shows that the author has inherited a patriarchal language to interpret and decode the Italian world.

In the opening letter, the author also reveals that on the day of Carolina's funeral, her father had put pictures of himself and Gary, his only son, in Carolina's coffin in order to seek protection. This revelation had a strong impact on Caperna Lloyd. First of all, the fact that her father never carried a picture of her and her sisters in his wallet was proof of the patriarchal structure ruling the family, a tradition that privileged the son over the daughters.²⁹ In addition, the father's idea that only he and Gary needed protecting, according to Caperna Lloyd, proved wrong, as the author's two sisters both died tragically in their forties. Secondly, the author resented how her father's behaviour had put a further burden on Carolina, who is now forever linked to another quality typical of the Madonna: the nurturing mother. As Caperna Lloyd writes: 'You protected your sons and guided your husband into the grave. But how could anyone bear the world's sorrows in that way? Who protected you? Even with your own death, the nurturing didn't stop.'³⁰

Moved by the idea of Carolina having to take care of the family even after her death, Caperna Lloyd changed the title of the memoir, which, initially, was going to be *Return to the Mother: A Holy Week Journey*. As the author said during the interview, '[...]that's why I changed the title, because he [her father] told that story and I wanted to be strong enough that I'm never gonna ask my sons, I don't want them to need me.

²⁹ The author addresses this issue also in her documentary *The Family Baggage*. In the film, Caperna Lloyd talks about a business her siblings, Shawn and Gary, had created together to build luxury houses. When the business failed, Gary walked out on Shawn and returned home. The father gave Gary money to start a new business and never helped Shawn financially. As Caperna Lloyd says in the film: 'Everyone in the family seemed to take sides, but no-one was on Shawn's. She made furious phone calls home, saying she would dance on everyone's graves for betraying her. She hit the ceiling when dad, like a good Italian father, loaned Gary a bunch of money to start another business in Oregon which he eventually lost. [...] It was such an Italian thing to protect the son.'

³⁰ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. ix.

And I don't wanna need them. That much.'³¹ Moreover, according to Caperna Lloyd, *Return to the Mother* seemed to limit the potential of the story and to be one-sided. Because of the genesis of the title, *No Pictures in my Grave* offered the author a way to explore her past as an Italian American daughter in relation to her father and Carolina. The latter represents the Italian points of reference underpinning the author's hybrid identity.

3. A quest for identity through a quest for Carolina: the journey begins

Caperna Lloyd's grandmother is a living part of the memoir. She embodies the 'good' Italian essence of the author's upbringing as opposed to the values handed down to her by her Italian father. For Caperna Lloyd, the search for her Italian roots thus starts with a travel to Terracina to meet Carolina's relatives. Once there, however, these relatives greet her with indifference. The lukewarm welcome leaves Caperna Lloyd cold and hurt, so much so that she decides to leave Terracina and to head to Trapani, in Sicily, to follow the well-known Easter Procession of the Mysteries.³² While at the Procession, Caperna Lloyd experiences an epiphany: looking at the statue of the Madonna of Sorrows carried in procession by several men on a platform called *ceto*, she recognizes her grandmother in the image of the Madonna's expression of grief. Awakened by this vision, she writes:

I recognized something of my grandmother in this powerful though sorrowful

³¹ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 262.

³² It is not uncommon for Italian Americans of later generations, who go back to Italy in order to connect with their ancestral past and roots, to find hostility in their Italian families. See for example Grizzuti's travel memoir, *Italian Days*. During Grizzuti's visit to her relatives in Italy, her cousin Amerigo addresses the author's family as 'abandoners' (p. 398) and further, another cousin, Paola, addresses Grizzuti as 'a bastard...not Italian and not American' (p. 405), making fun of Americans who migrate first and then come back to find their roots.

Madonna, and I became determined to understand the long-suffering nature of Italian women's lives. How was it that in Sicily the focus of the whole town was not on the dying son but on the grief-struck mother?³³

This question animates Caperna Lloyd's journey in Sicily, which culminates in the writing of her book.

Looking back at her grandmother in order to seek her own identity is one of the ways in which Italian American women have articulated their search for their ethnic past.³⁴ Gardaphé argues that, indeed, 'the key to reading the literature produced by third-generation Italian American writers is observing the role that the grandparent plays in connecting the writer to his or her ancestral past.'³⁵ Therefore, if the grandparent figure is one of the primary sources for the appropriation of one's ethnic culture, we can see why Caperna Lloyd chooses to travel back to Italy to reconnect with Carolina and grasp her past as a means to understand her own present. In *By the Breath of Their Mouths*, Bona also examines Caperna Lloyd's memoir as a narrative in which Caperna Lloyd reconnects with her ancestral faith and personal past by means of travelling back to Italy.³⁶ This reconnection begins with the author's encounter with Italy, the land Carolina had left to never return, like a Persephone-figure. Abducted and separated from her mother, Carolina was forced to leave her home and her own mother to join her husband in America. As Caperna Lloyd writes:

I remembered her crying when she came to visit us in Oregon: it had been forty years since Carolina had left Italy, and still they hadn't returned. Would she ever see her mother again? I couldn't imagine this pain, since I was so close to my

³³ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 6.

³⁴ Bona has also identified other strategies employed by Italian American women to stress ethnicity in their writings. Some of these are: the journey, the process of Americanization, the emphasis on generation, the coming of age and manifestation of illness. See Bona, 'Broken Images', p. 94.

³⁵ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 120.

³⁶ Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths*, chapter 2, 'Plenty to Confess: Women and (Italian) American Catholicism', pp. 39–72, (pp. 56–61).

own mother. And I wondered how my sons would feel if they were cut off from me in this way.³⁷

The way Caperna Lloyd remembers her grandmother shows how the author came to fix the image of Carolina as a victim of the migration experience in the family's collective memory. It is also revealing of the sense of powerlessness Italian women seemed to have over their own lives. Carolina represents the communication channel between the author and her Italian roots. Consequently, Caperna Lloyd consciously avoids any representation of Carolina as a helpless, vulnerable woman. She thus embarks on a quest to prove to herself that the history of her grandmother might have been different; that, perhaps, even her own previous interpretation of Carolina was a flat one, dictated by the biased notions of the patriarchal society and the patriarchal language the author grew up in. In the memoir, this opportunity of redemption is achieved by Caperna Lloyd by means of skilfully alternating and overlapping the figure of Carolina with the images of the dark Madonna of Sorrows of the Easter Procession, and that of Demeter and Persephone – and their excruciating story of separation and reunion. In the beginning, the link between these female images is the condition of pain and sorrow at the loss of a loved one. However, Caperna Lloyd is also struck by the vision of a Madonna who displays dark features rather than a candid and reassuring *figura*. As Caperna Lloyd writes with regard to the Madonna of Sorrows:

She was a far cry from the Madonnas I had grown up with in my Italian Catholic girlhood. Those Virgins were delicate statues of porcelain or graceful schoolbooks illustrations with modest blue robes and sweet, ivory-colored faces. They were gentle creatures, the kind Grandmother Carolina had prayed to. But

³⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 9.

this Marsala Madonna was different. She was dark and angry. She was powerful and struck me more like a Demeter than Mary.³⁸

As this statement suggests, then, the Procession's Madonna looked mysterious and different from the Western images of the light-skinned Madonna. That a Black Madonna could be adored by a whole town and carried in Procession seemed unreal to Caperna Lloyd. Such a halo of mystery and power exercised by this dark statue brought Caperna Lloyd to engage with the feminine power exuded by the sacred images of the Black Madonna. Drawing on Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, a pivotal influence in the study of the cult of the Black Madonna, Dennis Barone has noted that the reason why women are so devoted to this Madonna in particular is due to the fact that the church, as we know it today, "demoted" the Madonna "from goddess to saint" and reduced "her many characteristics [...] to obedience and patience".³⁹ Thus, the devotion towards the Black Madonna can be interpreted as an act of resistance carried out by women in order to challenge the male-dominated church and its hierarchical structure.

Reading the dark Madonna as symbolic of power rather than sorrow, Caperna Lloyd is able to reinterpret her grandmother's story as a narrative of courage and power. By means of intersecting and overlapping her memory of Carolina with the image of the dark Madonna of Sorrows, the author questions and challenges her grandmother's condition of victimhood and powerlessness. This new understanding of the Madonna as an authoritative Demeter figure was pivotal for Caperna Lloyd to enter her grandmother's past. As the author states: 'I grew within the story to get beyond her pain

³⁸ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 3.

³⁹ Dennis Barone, "'We've Always Been Different': Louisa Ermelino's Spring Street Trilogy and Italian American Women's Writing', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 48.1 (2006), 19–30 (p. 25); Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *Black Madonnas: Feminism, Religion, and Politics in Italy* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), p. 195.

and suffering. And that was the relationship with my grandmother. You can suffer, but you can emerge victorious. I saw her to be different as I originally saw her to be.’⁴⁰ This is an important evolution in the way Caperna Lloyd comes to read her grandmother’s life. Seeing Carolina as a courageous and powerful woman, the author redeems her grandmother’s identity as a submissive and sorrowful Madonna. In so doing, Caperna Lloyd not only entitles Carolina to her own voice and history; the author also defines a zone she can comfortably inhabit and onto which she can inscribe her Italian roots. Like a mythological figure, Carolina is now able to let go of anonymity, thus epitomizing the resistance against the silence surrounding the historical role of Italian American women.

4. A physical and mythical journey of self-discovery

Caperna Lloyd struggled to interpret her hybridity as a site of power and self-insurance as the author’s understanding of her ethnicity is linked to the image of Carolina, initially perceived as a sorrowful Madonna. One of the ways Caperna Lloyd conveys the fragility she perceives in relation to her identity is through the inclusion in the memoir of black and white pictures. These images portray broken and chipped objects and can be seen as representative of the post-modern fragmentation of the self.

⁴⁰ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March 2014), See appendix, p. 260.

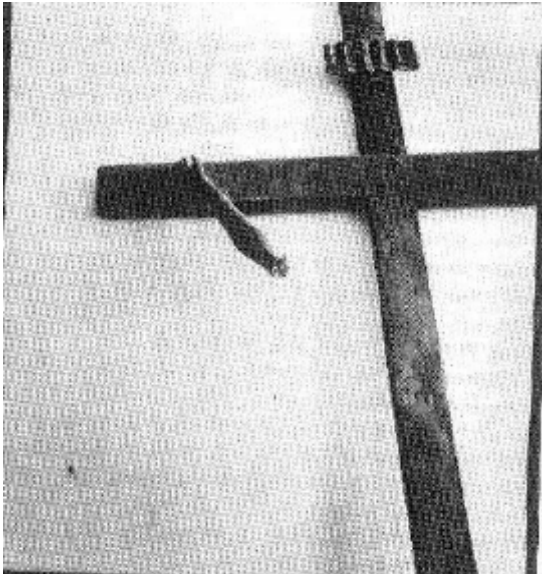


Figure 5 - Cross in a house in Trapani



Figure 6 - Church statuary and mosaic; Trapani.⁴¹

According to Kenneth J. Gergen:

Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to a reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold.⁴²

⁴¹ Courtesy of Susan Caperna Lloyd.

⁴² Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, 2nd edn (New York: BasicBooks, 1992), p. 71.

Unable to take hold of a fixed centre, Caperna Lloyd undergoes a phase in which she projects herself in the broken objects she photographs. As the author declared in the interview:

Post-modern, broken, truncated imagery is all what I am about. A lot of my imagery is all like this [...] I think that down deep the broken thing is a metaphor for my 'broken self' [...] I guess it's the lost parts of myself.⁴³

Taking part in the Procession of the Mysteries, Caperna Lloyd is dragged into an unexpected experience of self-discovery. She starts to investigate her hybridity and, through the quest of the Madonna, she also embarks on a quest for the lost parts of her self. Caperna Lloyd links the Madonna's expression of grief at the loss of her son, Jesus, to Carolina's suffering as a migrant and as isolated from a community of support in Oregon. At once, the author identifies herself with that very same grief as she, too, is suffering and experiencing a loss. In that moment, as she writes, 'the story I wanted to tell became a personal one'.⁴⁴ During the interview, Caperna Lloyd further stated the reason why the Madonna's quest resonates with her, as well as with the other Italian American writers, who have also turned to this mythic narrative to recreate their personal stories:

We are searching for lost parts of ourselves. I feel we are. Especially as Italian Americans. Because we have very patriarchal fathers who kept us more or less inside, we want to break out of that and go into the underworld [...] out of the house [...] out of the prescribed rules we were raised with [...] and damn it, you know, it's been hard. And then also, if you're also an immigrant, you don't have the support group. I was raised in a very WASP-y town on the coast of Oregon, a Scandinavian fishing town, and so there's no support [...] So the myth allows us

⁴³ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 248.

⁴⁴ Susan Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 6.

to break out of the idea that we have rules we are supposed to obey as a mother, as a Madonna and we can't be something else.⁴⁵

The myth of Demeter and Persephone becomes a means of liberation for Caperna Lloyd because it has enabled the author to escape her family's expectations about her life. The myth turns into a threshold that enables Caperna Lloyd to cross 'literal and figurative' borders. First of all, the myth offered Caperna Lloyd the opportunity to travel to Sicily on her own. This might look like a simplistic statement; nonetheless, as the author describes in her book, as well as reinforced in the interview, travelling on her own was a burdensome task. It was a challenging experience because she had to confront the Sicilian community, wary, at first, of this foreign and independent woman who travelled on her own. In addition, she had to overcome the obstacles deriving from having been brought up according to patriarchal paradigms which restricted women's public life. Susan Bassnett has stressed how, in the telling of their journeys, women travellers have managed to express their need to get away from the restricting rules of patriarchy. According to Bassnett: 'Travel for some women, it seems, may have offered a means of redefining themselves, assuming a different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home.'⁴⁶ Caperna Lloyd's 'different persona' emerges as an expression of part of her identity that was muted by patriarchal rules. Besides having to obey a controlling father, who kept her and her sisters 'more or less inside', these women were subject to a family language that conveyed the idea of women's role as strongly bound to domesticity and fixity. For instance, common sayings the author learnt as a child were: 'The woman at the window, the man on the road', and 'your mother's house is warm, is safe, is gold. Outside is dark,

⁴⁵ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 248.

⁴⁶ Bassnett, p. 234.

is black; the wolf is there'.⁴⁷ These statements instilled in Caperna Lloyd the perception that mobility and travel were engendered and belonged to men. Therefore, when the author embarked on her journey to Sicily to seek the myth of Persephone, she was enacting a strategy of resistance to subvert the notion of the 'angel in the house'. In their writings, contemporary women try to break the stereotypical image of the domestic woman by means of travelling like real explorers. Their books are filled with brave adventures in antithesis to the canonical image of the docile woman.⁴⁸ During the interview, Caperna Lloyd stated that the myth was pivotal to her to 'bridge the Italian identity and the American identity', because the myth was not a mere fairy tale, rather a narrative to be physically discovered and then re-interpreted for herself. As she declares:

[The myth] has helped me break away from the circumscribed rules I've mentioned. I live here in the United States, I don't have to be a woman who stays at home with their children just because that's how I was raised to think. But, obviously, by personally experiencing this in Sicily and forcing myself out into the underworld – which I wrote about in the book – physically doing that, got me into a place of self-insurance [...] I would say that doing that book and doing what I did in the book and going to all places and taking all the chances [...] I think you have to physically do stuff. You can't just think and do therapy and talk about it. You have to physically move and do it. So doing that gave me the ability to know that I did not have to be a shrinking violet or a stay-home mother. I can do anything.⁴⁹

Caperna Lloyd's statement highlights the importance of adventure and the physicality of movement as crucial aspects of one's personal growth and also as a radical action. Ian Chambers argues that:

Our sense of being, of identity and language is experienced and extrapolated from

⁴⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 111.

⁴⁸ See Giorgia Alù, 'Fabricating Home: Performances of Belonging and Domesticity in Contemporary Women's travel Writing in English About Italy', *Studies in Travel Writing*, 14.3 (2010), pp. 285–302.

⁴⁹ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 251.

movement: the 'I' does not pre-exist this movement and then go out into the world. The 'I' is constantly being formed and reformed in such a movement in the world.⁵⁰

In this sense, the idea of movement in Caperna Lloyd's personal quest is fundamental to triggering a process of change. At once, it is radical because it breaks with the patriarchal tradition of the Capernas. The author could start to revise and understand her identity only by forcing herself out into the underworld, as she said. The underworld, the world of darkness par excellence, transforms into an outer space awash with light. This outer dimension is the place of action. Caperna Lloyd uses the words 'doing that book' and not 'writing that book'. We could then argue that the process of writing, as inscribed in the world of action, becomes a means of empowerment that has led Caperna Lloyd to acquire 'the ability to know [...] [she] can do anything'. Therefore, writing allows the author to unravel a story of self-assertion.

The physical journey to Sicily is propelled by the author's urge to reconnect with her grandmother and the Italian values she symbolizes. The only way Caperna Lloyd could enter into the Italian world, was, indeed, through Carolina's memory. In remembering Carolina's stories about Italy, the author finds these stories provided useful links which, however, were not enough. These stories, that is, not always provided answers to the questions of roots and origin sought by Caperna Lloyd. Rather, these stories raised questions. The only way to find the answers is for Caperna Lloyd to travel to Italy and embark on a quest that might lead her to an ultimate understanding of the connection between her present and her past. In this light, the quest for personal location in history provides a base to assert one's identity. Thus, this quest for identity

⁵⁰ Ian Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 24.

presents itself as a ‘way of resolving problems of duality’.⁵¹ According to Gardaphé, these originate from an ‘ethnic anxiety’ Italian Americans of third generation experience. This condition of uneasiness can be related to the fact that, more often than not, when third-generation Italian Americans have to tackle their Italian American hybrid identity, they do not have the ‘ethnic tools’ to orient themselves, as they feel as not fully belonging to the American culture ‘into which they were born’;⁵² at once they are also detached from the experience of migration, as they never undertook it, but lived it through the collective memories of their family and of the Italian American community at large. A way to overcome this obstacle is, as Gardaphé argues, through ‘a combination of memory and imagination’.⁵³ Gardaphé’s statement underlines the possibilities an author like Caperna Lloyd envisions to refabricate and reinvent, to an extent, her Italian American identity through the practice of writing a travel memoir. The author’s quest is a way to, indeed, acknowledge some sort of duality that creates feelings of anxiety in relation to her hybrid identity. This is negotiated by the author thanks to the possibility the travel memoir, which as a literary expression offers the chance to conjugate memory, imagination, and the liberating experience of travel. It is not until Caperna Lloyd starts writing about her experience in Sicily and her participation in the Easter Procession, in fact, that she realises how much her Italian grandmother has influenced her life.

The revelation materializes in the author’s writing when she starts looking at the power of the Black Madonna. Because Caperna Lloyd can see the potential of self-assertion deriving from this sacred image, she travels to the village of Tindari to visit

⁵¹ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121. See also Jerre Mangione, ‘A Double Life: The Fate of the Urban Ethnic’, in *Literature and the Urban Experience* ed. by Michael C. Jaye and Ann Chalmers Watts (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 1981), pp. 169–83 (p. 171).

⁵² Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121.

⁵³ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121.

the Sanctuary of the Black Madonna. With regard to this experience she writes:

What interested me was that this original temple had been dedicated to a Mother Goddess, Cybele. Originally from Anatolia, she had been worshiped in pre-Hellenic times as an important fertility goddess, predating Demeter and Persephone. Eventually a fertility cult to Cybele had spread throughout the Mediterranean and, in the Roman era, had been brought to Rome at the request of the highest priestess, the Cumean Sybil.⁵⁴

The author, then, draws a comparison between the rites carried out during the Easter Procession and the cult devoted to Cybele and realises how similar these are in the way they are performed. She concludes:

Inanna, Attis, Adonis, Persephone, Osiris, Christ...I had found a growing list of dying and resurrecting deities. And the mourning goddess, like a group of sisters, continued the list, with Cybele, Demeter, Isis, and the *Addolorata*.⁵⁵

As these quotes seem to suggest, the power of the Black Madonna of Sorrows, who is part of the matrilineal host of deities venerated on the island, is rooted in the creative potential of hybridity. As Bhabha argues:

The importance of hybridity is that it bears the traces of those feelings and practices which inform it, just like a translation, so that hybridity puts together the traces of certain other meanings or discourses.⁵⁶

Starting from the image of the *Addolorata*, Caperna Lloyd is able to trace a potential moment from which the *Addolorata* descended, and then translate this moment into one that helps her to interpret the importance that the Madonna retains today. In

⁵⁴ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, pp. 136–7.

⁵⁶ Bhabha, in Rutherford, p. 211.

doing so, Caperna Lloyd is proving how the ‘third space’ can be of use to reconcile past, present, and the meaningful quest for roots. As the author also said in our interview, the relevance of this search for origin and archetype harks back to the fact that:

We live in myth. I think what’s really important for the old myths is there are types that are repeated over and over again in so many different mythologies that these are stories we are all familiar with from time immemorial as part of the human condition. [...] These myths are acted out all the time in our world’s cultures still [...] If you [...] hear those stories and go on the procession, you can take your own mythic life that you are not so conscious of and now it can tell you what the heck you’re doing in your life.⁵⁷

For Caperna Lloyd, thus, to look at the myth is a way to conjugate memory and imagination in order to refabricate her identity. The past Caperna Lloyd remembers and writes about, however, is not a space to walk into and remain imprisoned in. Rather, it is a dimension to draw strength from. In Caperna Lloyd’s narrative, the myth takes shape as a conduit for keeping memory alive and making it future-oriented. Only by transforming memory into a dynamic potential of self-change can Caperna Lloyd make the present meaningful.

In order to demonstrate the value of memory as a propelling force of movement, in the following section, I will discuss the memoir’s episode of the annual tradition of kneading the bread in the Sicilian village of San Biagio. This episode exemplifies how for Caperna Lloyd the past can be reworked through writing to create meaningful life experiences for contemporary society and for her process of identity negotiation.

⁵⁷ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 267.

5. Recovering memory through old myths and rituals

According to Corrado Pope, the meaning of the Procession as related to the myth of Demeter and Persephone is lost to the Sicilian community at large. In her article ‘Origins of Southern Italian Good Friday Processions’, Corrado Pope argues that, although the Trapani’s yearly event has been examined from a sociological and anthropological perspective, Trapani people do not have the same interest in understanding the Procession as such. Rather, they perceive it as their typical Easter tradition and part and parcel of their folkloric life. With regard to the Sicilian community of Trapani, Corrado Pope says that its ‘sense of history is quite “thin”’.⁵⁸ As Simon P. Newman argues, however, there is always a ‘thickness’ that underpins the taking part in commemorative events like a procession. As Newman says:

It is all but impossible for these people, whatever their original motives for taking part, to avoid making public political statements by and through their participation: both their presence and their participation involve some degree of politicization and an expression of political identity and power in a public setting.⁵⁹

Also in the documentary about the Procession, the people who take part in the event express a strong and personal attachment to it. Caperna Lloyd has interviewed several people – both women and men – engaged with the preparation of the Procession. These interviews highlight the importance the Procession holds in terms of providing hope and a sense of community. As one of the interviewees says, the Mysteries are ‘an

⁵⁸ Barbara Corrado Pope, ‘The Origins of Southern Italian Good Friday Processions’, in *Italian Americans Celebrate Life: The Arts and Popular Culture*, ed. by Paola Sensi-Isolani and Anthony Julian Tamburri, selected essays from the 22nd annual conference of the American Italian Historical Association (New York: American Italian Historical Association, 1990), pp. 155–68 (p. 160).

⁵⁹ Simon P. Newman, *Parades and the Politics of the Street: Festive Culture in the Early American Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997), pp. 8–9.

insurance against the feelings of uselessness, the anxiety with no name'.⁶⁰ And he further adds that:

You need to belong to some community to have an identity, to belong to a place. And that thing we need is the feeling of belonging. It is a feeling that goes on year after year and that gives you a point which you can think of, not to get lost. [...] Why do we like it? [...] The Mysteries is that you can take part [...] through action. These rituals offer men a way to connect with each other.⁶¹

The Procession celebrates the endurance of life through the possibility of rebirth. In ancient times, the Eleusinian Mysteries – rituals in honour of Demeter and Persephone – used to be celebrated. The cult originated in Eleusi, Greece, and then spread throughout the whole Mediterranean area.⁶² The Eleusinian Mysteries were celebrated every year in winter in order to ensure the growth of the grain. During Caperna Lloyd's journey in Sicily, the author personally experienced how these rites were still alive and were transformed by the Sicilian community to adapt to today's society. On Maundy Thursday before the Easter Procession, the author took a bus to the small village of San Biagio, near Agrigento. There, she was told, local women used to carry on the tradition of making the Easter bread, the *pane*. This was shaped into symbols of fertility and Easter subjects like 'flowers, birds, butterflies, angels, lambs, hearts, eggs'.⁶³ Besides evoking Christ's Last Supper, the *pane* is also a reference to the grain and the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. What impressed Caperna Lloyd in

⁶⁰ Caperna Lloyd, *Processione*.

⁶¹ Caperna Lloyd, *Processione*.

⁶² According to Ignazio Buttitta, these rites were celebrated in Sicily in the cities of Syracuse, Enna, Gela, Selinunte, Agrigento, Taormina, Camarina, Agira, and others. See Buttitta, p. 140. See also Emanuele Ciacieri, *Culti e Miti nella Storia Dell'Antica Sicilia* (Catania: Brancato, 1987); Eugenio Manni, *Sicilia Pagana* (Palermo: Flaccovio, 1963); Piero Orlandini, 'Diffusione del Culto di Demetra e Kore in Sicilia', *kokalos*, 14–15 (1969), 334–38.

⁶³ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 167.

particular was the fact that the rite of the bread was a female tradition. Conversely to what happens in Trapani, where the Procession appears to be a male-dominated event, in San Biagio Easter's most important ritual was kept alive by the women of the community. Through the kneading and the shaping of the dough, these women were creating life.⁶⁴ Looking at Stella, a woman from San Biagio, making the bread, Caperna Lloyd writes:

Instead of a Last Supper, I felt I was watching a priestess in an ancient fertility rite. Her bread offering was like the ritual cakes the women had brought to the old sanctuaries of Demeter and Persephone.⁶⁵

The author feels the power coming out of the act of shaping life, which is inscribed in the feminine nature. At this point Caperna Lloyd's mind looks for Carolina, and she writes:

In Stella's laugh, I heard my grandmother once more. Joking with her friends and dressed in a hand-knitted sweater like those that Carolina used to wear, Stella looked and acted like my grandmother. Were these the kind of women that Carolina had left behind? Was this the life she might have had? Somehow Stella and her friends were different from [...] most of the other Sicilian women I had met. Perhaps this was because I now saw them outside the confines of their homes. [...] They had taken charge of San Biagio's Easter tradition. It was created entirely by women, and Stella and her friends seemed self-confident and free [...] I wondered, too, if their sense of power came directly from the material with which they worked: the *pane*.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Another important cult devoted to Demeter and Persephone in Ancient Greece was that of the Thesmoforia, an exclusively female ritual. Women used to cultivate the ground and spend the period of sowing in isolation in the farms. See Buttitta, pp. 138–9.

⁶⁵ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 170.

⁶⁶ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 168.



Figure 7 - Santina Pastorella decorates the pane of San Biagio.⁶⁷

Despite centuries of different colonizations which transformed the island, thus, the substratum of the myth of Demeter and Persephone is still alive. The episode of San Biagio's tradition of the *pane* is symbolic of the way old rituals evolve through time, retaining the layers of memory of the past. Just like the Eleusinian Mysteries originated from other ancient rituals devoted to pre-existing deities and then evolved to accommodate the needs of the Mediterranean people,⁶⁸ the Sicilian community has inherited its story and rites, which continue to exist today. The celebration of memory – as the bread's episode and the Procession of the Mysteries exemplify – is an essential ritual because 'memory is our means of connecting past and present and constructing a

⁶⁷ Courtesy of Susan Caperna Lloyd.

⁶⁸ According to Buttitta, there is a rich literature that proves that Demeter and Kore are the Greek names used to replace other deities already existing in the territory. Buttitta, p. 141.

self and versions of experience we can live with'.⁶⁹ By means of refabricating Carolina's life in Italy – as part of the Sicilian women community – Caperna Lloyd redefines her grandmother as a 'creator of cultural artefacts'. In so doing, we can see how through the writing Caperna Lloyd combines myth, memory, and present. The memoir, then, becomes a site where the author is able to articulate a narrative of empowerment.

6. Processional movements and patterns of inversion

There is a strong relation between the myth, memory, and the Procession of the Mysteries as portrayed by Caperna Lloyd in her memoir. The myth of Demeter and Persephone is the myth of return, symbolic of the endurance of memory. The act of remembering works *à rebours* and is enacted through a process of inversion. Memory can operate according to what Freud has defined 'archaeological excavation'. The way memories resurface in a reversed order mirrors the image of an archaeological excavation where there are several layers of ruins to dig up before the subject reaches the original source of what s/he is working on to retrieve.⁷⁰ In the process of unearthing memories, then, the subject's interpretation plays a pivotal role as 'memory is textual as well as spatial'.⁷¹

According to Barbara A. Babcock, a symbolic inversion is

⁶⁹ Gayle Greene, 'Feminist Fiction and the Use of Memory', *Signs*, 16.2 (1991), 290–321 (p. 293).

⁷⁰ See Sigmund Freud, 'The Aetiology of Hysteria', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey, 3 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), III, 189–221.

⁷¹ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 13.

any act of expressive behaviour which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms be they linguistic, literary or artistic, religious or social and political.⁷²

In her article ‘The Virgin of Sorrows Procession: A Brooklyn Inversion’, anthropologist Kay Turner documents this yearly event as carried out by the Italian community in Brooklyn. As Turner explains, the Brooklyn Procession, performed as a symbolic response to the needs of Italian migrants to retain their cultural identity, is characterized by patterns of inversion.⁷³ These inversions are played out on both a geographical and symbolical level. In relation to the Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani, the same patterns of inversion can be found. From a geographic perspective, the Procession begins in the street and ends in the church. There is a subversive character evident in this inversion as it seems to undermine the paradigm of the church as the only holy fortress and, at once, blurs the ‘boundaries between sacred and secular realms’.⁷⁴ Rigid categories, thus, are challenged and a form of chaos is established until the final act, when the statue of the Madonna is returned to the church at the end of the Procession. Drawing on Victor Turner’s idea of anti-structure, Kay Turner defines the processional movement as ‘anti-structural’. According to V. Turner, the anti-structure is ‘something positive, a generative center’ defined by the ideas of liminality and *communitas*. *Liminality* is intended as ‘a movement between fixed points and is [...] ambiguous, unsettled and unsettling’, whereas *communitas* is ‘spontaneous, immediate, concrete’.

⁷² Barbara A. Babcock, *The Reversible World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 14.

⁷³ For a further example of the importance of the yearly ritual of the Procession as an event that nurtures and sustains the roots of Italian migrants, see the annual Procession in honour of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Anne Marie Fortier, *Migrant Belongings: Memory, Space, Identity* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), pp. 142–51.

⁷⁴ Kay F. Turner, ‘The Virgin of Sorrows Procession: A Brooklyn Inversion’, *Folklore: Papers of the University Folklore Association*, 9 (1980), 1–26 (p. 7).

The idea of anti-structure indicates a moment of chaos out of which ‘order can emerge revitalized’.⁷⁵ K. Turner argues, in fact, that a ‘procession quite often marks a state of transition [...] that calls participants to a new birth’.⁷⁶ According to Caperna Lloyd, the idea of renewal in the Procession is connected to the image of the circle on both a physical and metaphorical level.

The Procession twists and turns in a circular way: it starts from the street out of the main church, parades all around the town, and eventually returns to the point where it started. At this stage the statue of the Madonna is returned to the church and chaos is replaced by a state of order. When the statue is placed back into the church, it means that the mother’s quest is finally over and she is able to rejoin her son. On the liminal threshold of the church, the *ceto* of the Madonna is turned to look at the processionists for the last time before the carriers bring it definitively inside, where she will remain for another year. This is a moment of deep tension, ‘a big emotional moment for the *portatori*, and the crowd’.⁷⁷ When the threshold of the church – symbolic of the *limen*, the moment of transition between a state of ‘no longer and not yet’ possibility – is crossed, the whole community witnesses the fusion between opposing forces: ‘mother and son, male and female, death and life, sacred and secular’.⁷⁸ In relation to this particular moment, a man involved in the Procession tells Caperna Lloyd that this final act is of utmost importance for the community. He says, ‘we think of our mothers. The Madonna is our mother, too. At this moment we cry – for her, for all the mothers in the world.’⁷⁹ The quest of the Madonna, thus, is felt as a universal moment that brings

⁷⁵ Victor W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York City: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), p. 83.

⁷⁶ K. Turner, ‘The Virgin of Sorrows Procession’.

⁷⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 187.

⁷⁸ K. Turner, ‘The Virgin of Sorrows Procession’, p. 23.

⁷⁹ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 12.

together the whole community in the name of the mother's pain and loss. As Caperna Lloyd stated in the interview, the renewal is strictly linked to the circular movement:

The whole idea of the circle. If you really make the journey with people you're with, you are sharing in this journey. And you go through all day, from the light to darkness to the light again, if you physically do that together and you dance it, it's renewal. What is it about the circle? It's wholeness. And the circle of life from death to life to death eccetera. It's all circular and I think that if we just move in a circle, I think it's a physical sense of renewal. You've completed a circle, you've completed a journey [...] Life is one big circle of movement from life to the end of our physical life, our death. But there are many circular journeys during the time we're here.⁸⁰

A peculiarity of the Procession of the Mysteries is that it is articulated following patterns of inversions. The reversed nature of the Procession is linked to the fact that its ultimate function is that of remembering. The Procession of the Mysteries is indeed enacted to remember, and commemorate the death of Jesus and his rebirth to a new life in the world as a sign of hope for humankind. At the same time, as Caperna Lloyd's statement points out, one embarks on an individual journey as well. The ritual of the Procession puts in motion multiple journeys: the Procession itself, the journey of the community, and the journey of the individual. These journeys are enacted, firstly, through a circular movement represented by the route of the Procession itself, which, as one member of the community explains to Caperna Lloyd, is called 'the circle of motion';⁸¹ and secondly, through an imagined circular journey each individual undertakes. While walking in the Procession, the whole community, sharing the tension of the sacred event, commemorates the death and rebirth of Jesus. At once, each individual has his/her own personal motifs that underpin his/her participation in the

⁸⁰ Interview with Caperna Lloyd (24 March, 2014). See appendix, p. 253.

⁸¹ Caperna Lloyd, *Processione*.

Procession. In this sense, the Procession is an act of individual and collective memory that springs ‘from shared communications about the meaning of the past that are anchored in the life-worlds of individuals who partake in the communal life of the respective collective’.⁸² The importance of circularity and its connection with the idea of renewal is, moreover, emphasized by the circular structural level of the memoir’s narrative. The first chapter of the book, ‘Procession’, recounts the first time Caperna Lloyd saw the Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani. The last chapter of the book, ‘Procession’, recounts the last time the author saw the Procession and actively took part in it. This circularity frames the renewal of the self of the author.

7. Procession and memory: the politics of circular narratives

In the first chapter of the memoir, when Caperna Lloyd sees the Procession, she witnesses one of the main patterns of inversion highlighted by K. Turner. K. Turner argues that the most striking inversion is the fact that, although participants are taking part in the death and rebirth of Jesus, the main focus is all on the mother, the Virgin of Sorrows, and her search for her son.⁸³ While taking part in the Procession, Caperna Lloyd notes the same paradox and asks: ‘How was it that in Sicily the focus of the whole town was not on the dying son but on the grief-struck mother?’⁸⁴ The author’s question seems to be interpreted by one of the men collaborating in the setting up of the Procession as he approaches her and explains: ‘The *processione* is not really the story of Christ’s death. It is about his mother, Mary, and the terrible things he did to her by

⁸² Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory’, *History and Theory*, 41.2 (2002), 179–97 (p. 188).

⁸³ K. Turner, ‘The Virgin of Sorrows Procession’, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 6.

dying.’⁸⁵ This revelation seemed at odds with the author’s experience in Sicily. For the whole time during her stay in Trapani, she had to deal with a patriarchal community in which women seemed to hide from sight and in which she struggled to fit in because of her gender. She was also encouraged by her friend Patrizia to wear a wedding band when walking on her own on the streets without a male companion. Although Caperna Lloyd had desperately wanted to take part in the Procession, such an honour was never offered to her. In the beginning, she attributed her passive role in the Procession to her status of foreigner, *l’Americana*, the American, as they used to call her in town. Nonetheless, she had to rethink her position when her son Sky, who was only nine years old, and also her husband, Tom, were both asked to take an active part in the Procession. While Sky walked with the *ceto*, Tom acted as a *bilancino*. The *bilancino* is one of the most important roles and is the man who walks the *ceto* together with the *portatori* carrying most of the weight on his shoulders. To her great disappointment, Caperna Lloyd was asked by one of the organizers to act as one of the crying women dressed in black who walk with the *ceto* of the Madonna at the very end of the Procession. She was supposed to cry and pray together with other mourning women while supporting the Madonna in her restless search for Jesus – a role which Caperna Lloyd refused to play.⁸⁶

In the last chapter of the book, on the other hand, Caperna Lloyd tells of her experience as a carrier in the Procession. In describing the joyous act of carrying, Caperna Lloyd compares the moving of the platform among the crowd to a sea waving.

⁸⁵ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Caperna Lloyd refused the role as one of the mourning women at the very end of the Procession. From that position, she would have not been able to watch the whole event. Although that of the mourning women might appear as a minor role, as a member of the community explains in Caperna Lloyd’s documentary, ‘In Sicily, there was the habit, which now is fading away, which was that of dressing in black for years and years maybe perpetually when you had a death in your family. And now it’s gone away, but that was a way of ritualizing mourning that helped you to do something against the hopelessness of death.’

She writes: ‘I felt we were floating on some primal sea. We swayed our *ceto* from side to side; it was like a ship.’⁸⁷ This moment of bliss and complete chaos that precedes the end of the Procession seems to echo Carolina’s experience of the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. The circular narrative of the memoir, which starts with the picture in which ‘Carolina’, hemmed in by her children, ‘looked like an immigrant Madonna, surrounded by her *portatori*’,⁸⁸ returns to the memory of Carolina and the image of her journey to the New World. By the end of the book, thus, readers realise that *No Pictures in my Grave* is kept together by a double circular narrative. As Rita Felski has noted, women writers, more and more often, have been drawn to the writing of a narrative of self-discovery. This narrative, Felski argues, lends itself to the telling of the female protagonist’s gaining of self-knowledge – which generally takes place far ‘from a male-defined context’.⁸⁹ Felski defines this narrative as a ‘narrative of awakening’. A peculiarity of this kind of writing is the fact that the stories are generally articulated around a circular narrative structure in which ‘the *telos* of the novel refers back to a point of origin’.⁹⁰ This looking backward – which in Caperna Lloyd’s work is enacted through the quest for Carolina and the myth of Demeter and Persephone – is ‘mythical rather than historical, a search for archetypes [...] in order to discover a mythical identity’.⁹¹

The employment of circularity in female writings like Caperna Lloyd’s memoir is also a political and necessary act. Circular narratives allow authors to rewrite their stories and H/history from unofficial points of view. These narratives, thus, offer an

⁸⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 184.

⁸⁸ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 9.

⁸⁹ Rita Felski, ‘The Novel of Self-Discovery: Necessary Fiction?’, *Southern Review*, 19.2 (1980), 131–48 (p. 131).

⁹⁰ Felski, p. 141.

⁹¹ Felski, p. 141.

opportunity to look at the past and rewrite it to include erased or neglected perspectives of marginal and disenfranchised subjects. This possibility opens up questions of identity and how it is not a given and finite product. Rather, identity continuously undergoes processes which are fluid and changing. In relation to identity and the circularity that contributes to define it and transform it through time and space, Bauman refers to the idea of an ‘identity-puzzle’.⁹² According to Bauman, this metaphor is a fragile one and not properly apt to describe the process of identity construction. Bauman says that when we have a puzzle, it comes in a box and the final image to be put together is provided on the lid. Therefore, how to get from A to B, how to put the puzzle together, is left to the individual. The final result, however, cannot be different from the one indicated by the image on the lid. With regard to identity, it could only be compared to a faulty puzzle, where pieces are missing and we never know how many of them actually are in the box. In the case of the puzzle bought in the shop, as Bauman explains, the final solution is ‘goal-oriented’:⁹³ it is provided beforehand and it is up to the individual how to put the pieces together. On the other hand, the identity-puzzle is not such an easy task and is ‘means-oriented’:⁹⁴ we do not have a final image we aim to complete, but a certain number of pieces. With these pieces we can put together different image(s); it is up to us to define the final one.⁹⁵

Circular narrative structures are ‘means-oriented’. They allow us distance from the idea that a final story exists, pre-packaged and already provided. Therefore, it becomes possible to go back and redefine the final image(s) so as to include new pieces that result in new pictures. Circular narratives, finally, subtend the possibility of

⁹² Bauman, pp. 48–49.

⁹³ Bauman, p. 48.

⁹⁴ Bauman, p. 49.

⁹⁵ Bauman, p. 49.

imagining multiple perspectives that enable disenfranchised and marginal subjects to articulate their own voice.

When Caperna Lloyd is acting as a carrier in the last chapter of her book, she is creating a new inversion which generates chaos in the distribution of the traditional roles. As we learn from the documentary she made, in fact, the carrier is a tradition handed down from father to son and therefore it is a traditionally male role.⁹⁶ This moment signs a point of no return for the author who feels renewed and ‘transcending time and place’⁹⁷ while dancing with the men on the steps of the church. As she writes:

Surrounded by the men, I felt ecstatic [...] Exhausted yet newly energized [...] I had become the Goddess I had sought. With the *portatori*, I cried. [...] I cried for so many things, least of all for my own journey’s end. But these were tears I had never experienced before. [...] They were the tears of the joyous Black Madonna, of Cybele, of *L’Addolorata*, of the thankful Demeter having found her daughter again. I, too, had found the lost part of myself.⁹⁸

Finally, *No Pictures in my Grave* falls into the category of the ‘narrative of awakening’ in which readers can witness the evolution and self-assertion of the protagonist. This gaining of power, however, does not take place, as Felski argues, far from ‘a male-defined context’. Rather, it is propelled by the exclusion from the male world when Caperna Lloyd is offered the role of walking with the *ceto* of the mourning women. The complete awakening and renewal of the author can only happen when she manages to join the men in the act of carrying the statue. While dancing with the *portatori*, the author is possessed by a new energy and life. As she writes: ‘We paused one last time. Then, unafraid of what I would find inside, I entered the doors and came home.’⁹⁹ The

⁹⁶ Caperna Lloyd, *Processione*.

⁹⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave*, p. 188.

⁹⁸ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave*, pp. 187–88.

⁹⁹ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in My Grave*, p. 188.

men she joined constitute part of the ‘underworld’ Caperna Lloyd wanted to go into. And by going into the underworld and facing the unknown, Caperna Lloyd emerged renewed and empowered.

8. Conclusion

This chapter has followed Caperna Lloyd’s quest for her ethnic, cultural, and religious roots. The author’s search revolved around the memory of her Italian grandmother, Carolina. As Gardaphé has argued:

Immigrant figures in third-generation writing are central to the construction of narrative myths of origin, and their portrayal in literature take on a mythic function both in documenting the immigrant past and in creating explanations of the cultural differences that were attributed to Americans of Italian descent.¹⁰⁰

Because these mythic figures are often enigmatic to the eyes of their grandchildren, the *Italianità* the grandparents epitomize is shrouded by an aura of mystery. The initial difficulty of fully understanding the cumbersome past of Carolina caused Caperna Lloyd to experience conflicting feelings about her Italian American identity. As it emerged from this chapter, Carolina embodies the symbols of the Italian world Caperna Lloyd seeks to rediscover and appropriate in Sicily. As Carolina’s story, however, is only partially alive in the author’s memory, Caperna Lloyd refabricates her grandmother’s identity. Although conscious of Carolina’s origins in Terracina, Caperna Lloyd reinvents her grandmother’s story in Sicily. This exemplifies the author’s need for deep roots that can boast a rich and nourished tradition, roots that include a sense of

¹⁰⁰ Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121.

community and family. This is what Caperna Lloyd found in Sicily and where she felt she belonged. Sicily is also the place where Caperna Lloyd reimagines her grandmother's past as the author was able to link the grandmother's story to the myth's narrative. Carolina is, thus, redefined as a Persephone-like figure, separated from her mother at an early age and uprooted from her country to migrate to Oregon to join her husband.

In *No Pictures in my Grave*, the ground for rediscovery and refabrication of the author's Italian ethnic roots is provided by the Easter Procession of the Mystery and the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Looking at the Procession as a yearly event that replaced the rituals carried out in favour of the goddesses Demeter and Persephone, Caperna Lloyd's memoir tackles the question of hybridity and the possibility this offers to recreate models of identity and to overcome the vulnerabilities underpinning intercultural dialogue. Hybridity is also expressed through the intermingling of the hybrid literary form of travel writing and the myth Persephone. This myth, in fact, is the one that best of all expresses the idea of hybridity, as well as 'border crossing, both literal and figurative'. Not only does Persephone physically travel every six months between the world of the mother and her kingdom in Hades but the myth is, at once, symbolic of the coexistence of death and life blended in the figure of Persephone. The goddess, that is, is hybrid in her embodiment of the young virgin – a quality indicated by her name Kore, meaning child – and at once Persephone as the Queen of the Underworld. The goddess's hybrid nature becomes clearer if we look at the linguistic components of her name: Persephone, in fact, derives from the Greek words *phero* and *phonos* and means 'she who brings death'. Therefore, there is a clear opposition and overlapping here between the naïvety typical of the young Kore and the dreadful quality

of death embodied by Persephone in the underworld. For these reasons, the travel memoir, joined with the myth of Persephone, has provided Caperna Lloyd with an extremely fertile ground to rework and to fabricate her hybrid identity.

The relevance of the myth emerges also in the structural form of the memoir, which is kept together by a circular narrative. This circularity is organized around the carrying out of the Procession. Drawing on anthropologist Kay Turner, Bona has argued that, in relation to Caperna Lloyd's memoir, the circularity can be read as a reproduction of the fertility rites enacted in honour of Demeter and Persephone. As Turner argues, 'Mary is historically and prehistorically related to fertility cults and worship of the old earth goddess.'¹⁰¹ Therefore, for Bona Caperna Lloyd's use of circularity is a way to organize a narrative structure that mirrors the feminine universe.¹⁰² The way in which Caperna Lloyd has employed circularity is relevant in relation to her way of unearthing the myth and old rituals and how these helped her to understand her Italian American upbringing. As I have argued, the recovery of the myth of Persephone through her physical journey and its revision through writing enabled Caperna Lloyd to redeem Carolina's lack of agency. The empowerment occurs also on a physical level through the process of mobility enacted by the author. Because Carolina led a confined life in Oregon, the author's journey is a tribute to the grandmother who never dared to return to Italy. As Caperna Lloyd explained: 'I think that I was making the step outside for her',¹⁰³ thus redeeming the sacrificed life of her grandmother and keeping her memory alive. Therefore, the author reinterprets the myth through an empowering point of view. The myth of Demeter and Persephone takes shape as one of collective memory that comes alive in the Easter Procession. This is celebrated as a universal moment during

¹⁰¹ K. Turner, 'The Virgin of Sorrows Procession', pp. 1–26.

¹⁰² Bona, *By The Breath of Their Mouths*, pp. 57–58.

¹⁰³ Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd (24 March 2014). See appendix, p. 257.

which the Sicilian community is called to remember the death of Jesus and his rebirth. The circularity is a political act that has enabled the author to rewrite the history of her family, including subjects like Carolina, whose memory is exposed to a process of erasure.

The importance of *No Pictures in my Grave* is testified by the attention several Italian American scholars – Goeller, Giunta, and Bona, just to name a few – have paid to its structure and themes.¹⁰⁴ In her critical work *Writing with an Accent*, Giunta, commenting on Caperna Lloyd’s memoir, as well as on others written by Italian American women, argues that the inclusion of material culture (such as, for instance, the tradition of the Easter Procession in Trapani) into Italian American women’s works is a way for these authors to express their ethnic heritage. Moreover, the way this material culture is articulated throughout these artists’ works tends to debunk myths and stereotypes about Italian American women. The singular and distinctive in Italian American women’s writings becomes, as Giunta says, a marker of difference. In addition, it is a trace ‘of cultural memory that has undergone the trauma of emigration, with its devastating but also creative and culturally productive results’.¹⁰⁵

Caperna Lloyd’s memoir and documentary about the Easter procession of Trapani record for future generations the story of Italian American migration, retold from unofficial points of view and resisting the idea that Trapani people have long forgotten the spiritual and religious meaning of this important event. At once, Caperna Lloyd’s works report the story of the Sicilian people and the endurance of a past which continues to resurrect, shape, and nurture their present time through the myth.

¹⁰⁴ Goeller; Giunta, ‘Persephone’s Daughters’; Giunta, *Writing With an Accent*; Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths*.

¹⁰⁵ Giunta, *Writing With an Accent*, p. 95.

In the following chapter, I will examine Ragusa's text, *The Skin between Us*. We will move from travel writing to an 'in-between' space of memoir writing that combines travel and family memoir. If Caperna Lloyd had to travel to Sicily to discover her relationship with the myth, chapter three shows how Ragusa moves in between different memoir writing categories and different images of Persephone to finally articulate and define her liminal and hybrid identity.

Chapter 3

Crossing the Threshold of the Skin through Persephone: Cultural Conflicts in *The Skin between Us* by Kym Ragusa

Kym Ragusa is a half Italian American and half African American writer and film director. She is also the author of the memoir *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty and Belonging* (2006),¹ a book that, leveraging the interplay of myth and memory, engages with past and present racial conflicts in the United States, as well as issues of class, gender, and identity construction. Ragusa's work could be defined as an 'in-between memoir', as the author unravels her story by turning to both her experience of travel, like Caperna Lloyd, and family memoir writing, like Clapps Herman.

The textual analysis of *The Skin between Us* offered in this chapter aims to shed light on the author's appropriation and re-invention of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone as a response to crucial issues in contemporary society. Hall underlines how 'cultural diversity' is 'increasingly, the fate of the modern world, and ethnic absolutism a regressive feature of late-modernity'. He argues that:

The greatest danger now arises from forms of [...] cultural identity – new or old – which attempt to secure *their* identity by adopting closed versions of culture of community and by the refusal to engage [...] with the difficult problems that arise from trying to *live with* difference. The capacity to live with difference is [...] the coming question of the twenty-first century.²

¹ Ragusa, *The Skin Between Us*.

² Hall, 'Culture, Community, Nation', p. 361.

Ragusa's book seems to resonate with Hall's concerns about 'cultural diversity' and examines the author's experience of a subject in-between two different cultures and two antithetical realities: the African American and the Italian American communities.

In *The Skin between Us*, Ragusa assembles and narrates the story of her two families. Her maternal family has African origins rooted in the character of Sybela Owens, who was a black slave in the plantations of Maryland. Ragusa's paternal family, on the other hand, has Italian origins and migrated to America in the 1900s out of necessity. Although sharing a destiny of uprooting, these families are divided by the colour of their skin and related racial prejudices. On a narrative structure level, the memoir presents a circular structure framed by the prologue and the epilogue in which the author recounts her journey to Sicily, where she travelled to make a documentary about the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in 1999.

I will argue that *The Skin between Us* portrays the clash and then the ultimately fruitful encounter between different cultures. That is not to say that Ragusa is suggesting an easy and simplistic solution to the question of hybrid identities and the cohabitation of cultural difference. What Hall defines as 'the capacity to live with difference', is described by Ragusa as 'an almost acrobatic capacity for contradiction and denial'.³ The precarious balance Ragusa experiences, like an acrobat on a thin rope, is at the core of her existential questioning and understanding of her personal and cultural roots. The relentless issue of belonging which characterizes Ragusa's story has its epicentre in her own skin. As I will discuss, the skin is a deceptive mark of

³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 223. The 'almost acrobatic capacity' is the key Caterina Romeo employs to read Ragusa's memoir. Romeo's essay discusses also other issues presented in this chapter of the thesis, such as the white flight, race and ethnicity, racial passing, interconnection of Europe, Africa, and the US, multiracial Palermo, and most of all, the myth of Persephone. See Caterina Romeo, 'Una capacità quasi acrobatica', in Kym Ragusa, *La Pelle che ci Separa*, trans. by Caterina Romeo and Clara Antonucci (Roma: Nutrimenti, 2008), pp. 249–70.

difference and, as Sara Ahmed defines it, an ‘unstable *border*’.⁴ The skin, that is, can construct social hierarchies, determining rigid categories of knowledge and power. Additionally, as I will clarify through the episode of ‘racial *passing*’, the skin is a deceiving and unstable border that foregrounds the ideology of race. The idea of the skin as the catalyst of Ragusa’s anxiety with regard to her in-between position is central to Ragusa’s narrative. *The Skin between Us* unfolds a story of personal and collective fight; it is a painful re-elaboration of the author’s life intertwined with her family story and aspects of American racial history. Ragusa revisits Harlem and New Jersey to recollect memories from her childhood and adolescence in those places, and to ultimately make sense of the past. Issues of gender, class, and race inform her narration and her struggle to come to terms with her hybridity and identity quest. As Ragusa has, over and over again, experienced on her own skin, identity is not something univocal, one-dimensional, fixed. Identity is elusive, a protean concept, and it can be the site where doubts and questions of belonging wait to be answered. Although this consideration might suggest a move towards fixity, I argue that Ragusa’s quest for belonging is instead one of identity negotiation. In order to do so, we will look at the role and function of the myth of Persephone in this process of negotiation.

During her childhood, the story of Demeter and Persephone was recounted to the author by Miriam, her African American grandmother. The myth is a precious piece of information about Ragusa’s Sicilian heritage and roots and, as the memoir shows, gains importance insofar as the author turns to it as a means of identification.

This chapter will first explore Ragusa’s sense of disempowerment and the circumstances that make her declare: ‘[...] I saw myself in the figure of Persephone, the

⁴ Sara Ahmed, ‘Animated Borders: Skin, Colour and Tanning’, in *Vital Signs: Feminist Reconfigurations of the Bio/Logical Body*, ed. by Margrit Shildrick and Janet Price (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), pp. 45–65 (p. 45).

good girl destined to live a life split in two. A girl who is always leaving, whose every homecoming is a goodbye.’⁵ After a brief outline of the racial conflicts that divided the author’s families, I will investigate how, in her memoir, Ragusa elaborates and narrates aspects of her upbringing as a biracial child and her experiences as a woman in America. This will lead us to understand how the author faces, and eventually resolves, personal crises and identity conflicts. I will draw mostly on Evelyn Ferraro’s reading of Ragusa’s book. According to Ferraro, Ragusa negotiates her need for cultural roots and personal belonging by adopting three strategies: contesting, disordering, and connecting.⁶ These strategies are useful to examine some of the inconsistencies connected to biased notions of race that marked the author’s life and are explored by Ragusa in *The Skin between Us*. I will argue that the strategies of contesting, disordering, and connecting are all tied together by a mode of re-telling. Memory and myth interact through writing and help the author to acknowledge and appreciate her composite cultural heritage. The act of re-telling takes shape as a political act of resistance enacted by Ragusa, who, by giving voice to her memories, re-tells the story of her own biracial experience together with that of her Italian American and African families. By doing so, the memoir paves the ground for negotiation between individual and collective memories. By turning her memory into a site where possible truths unfold, Ragusa is able to re-tell the stories of the women of her families, who contributed to shape her own identity. The writing of the memoir, finally, ensures these stories endure in time.

⁵ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 107.

⁶ Ferraro, ‘Southern Encounters in the City’.

1. *The Skin between Us* and the unstable border of skin

The Skin between Us revolves around Ragusa's painful path of identity quest and relentless need to belong to her Italian American and African American families. The delicate position of Ragusa as 'split in two', caught in between her two families – and consequently the two communities into which they belong – originates from the harsh racism that divided them. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha raises a question that can be relevant to a textual analysis of Ragusa's book. Bhabha asks:

How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meaning and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual, and even incommensurable?⁷

The question highlights the importance of exploring the grounds of conflict and how a subject 'in-between' this conflict can emerge empowered. It is in this light that it is possible to understand Ragusa's urge to claim and to come to terms with her hybrid identity. The whole story of the memoir is underpinned by the author's need to find the answers to two questions she is constantly asked and which derive from unsolved racial and cultural conflicts:

What are you?

Black and Italian. African American, Italian American. American.

Other. Biracial, Interracial. Mixed-blood, Half-Breed, High-Yellow, Redbone, Mulatta. Nigger, Dago, Guinea.

Where are you from?

⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 2.

I don't know where I was conceived, but I was made in Harlem. Its topography is mapped on my body: the borderlines between neighbourhoods 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.⁸

Unable to provide the inquisitive other with either a pleasing, or a certain, definition of her identity, Ragusa writes a story which reveals the importance of finding models of cultural negotiation that can best serve to sustain the quest for roots and the demand for the subjective and collective negotiation of cultural values. In her memoir, Ragusa revises the differences and the inconsistencies characterizing the critical periods of her childhood and early adolescence. The daughter of an African American woman and an Italian American man, Ragusa embodies 'two bloodlines meeting', as she puts it.⁹ Nonetheless, the author offers a story that overcomes racial binary and explores how race is a deceptive 'unstable *border*' inseparable from notions of class, gender, religion, sexuality, and geography. Ragusa's narrative exemplifies the dangers and fragilities that derive from the construction of race and ethnicity, and which have led to forms of reciprocal racism expressed by the author's communities of belonging. One remarkable instance of this process occurs when Kym's Italian father, still a young man, introduced his girlfriend (who will be Kym's mother) to his family in the late sixties.¹⁰ The author's paternal grandmother, Gilda, could not stop crying because her son had brought shame into the family. She refers to the girl as 'a nigger' and a '*moulignan*'¹¹ (a

⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 26.

⁹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 18.

¹⁰ The author's parents' names (real or fake) are never revealed throughout the narration of the memoir. Only at the end of the memoir do we find out that Gilda calls the author's father 'June'. Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 228.

¹¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 30.

southern Italian dialect term meaning ‘eggplant’, commonly used by Italian Americans to insult African Americans). Similarly, when Kym’s mother introduced her boyfriend to her mother, Miriam, she did not even let him stay and ordered him to leave, as he was nothing but ‘poor white trash’.¹²

If, on the one hand, the racism towards the black girl expressed by the Italian American family could be readily understood as a matter of skin colour, on the other hand, the opposite has its roots in the working-class status attributed to the Italian people who migrated to America.¹³ Italians were considered legally white; on a social scale, however, they did not equate with the prevailing white Anglo-American society. Italians, like African Americans, were subject to forms of racism, discrimination, and marginalization due to their peasant origins. Italians and African Americans had to compete for labour jobs and this competition often put them at odds against each other.¹⁴ This shared experience did not seem to have produced forms of communal

¹² Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 29.

¹³ This is exemplified, for instance, by Louise DeSalvo’s essay ‘Color: White/Complexion: Dark’. DeSalvo writes that America ‘has not yet fully equated the Italian American experience with the human experience’. Louise DeSalvo, ‘Color: White/Complexion: Dark’, in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 17–28 (p. 23).

¹⁴ See Rudolph J. Vecoli, ‘Italian Americans and Race: To Be or Not to Be White?’, in *Merica: A Conference on the Culture and Literature of Italians in North America*, ed. by Aldo Bove and Giuseppe Massara (Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 2006), pp. 94–109 (p. 99). One remarkable episode of racism described by Ragusa in her memoir in chapter nine is set in Bensonhurst. In 1989, Yusef Hawkins, a young black man, went to the Italian neighbourhood of Bensonhurst to buy a car. On that occasion, Yusef was shot dead by a local man. Yusef was attacked because his killer thought Yusef was dating a girl from Bensonhurst. Following this episode, African Americans marched in Bensonhurst to protest against this further violent act of racism inflicted on their community. While marching peacefully, however, Italian Americans threw watermelons at them. When interviewed, Italian Americans commented: ‘We just want them out of the neighbourhood – our boys were only trying to protect us’. Looking at the news, Ragusa feels deeply ashamed of her Italian roots and of the Italian community, so much so that she also thought to change her surname. She finally writes: ‘The jeering spectators, their faces twisted with murderous hatred, looked like people in my own family. The women hissing from their windows looked like Gilda. This was the story of my father’s family and my mother’s family writ large, and in blood. The policed borders of the body and the community, the illicit desire, the ancient rules broken, and the brutal consequences of such transgressions. It was my history, but I survived it. Yusef Hawkins wasn’t so fortunate.’ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 224.

solidarity and resistance to what Ronald Takaki calls ‘master narratives’.¹⁵ In his talk at Columbia University, Takaki explained that it is a ‘pervasive story’ that America ‘was settled by European immigrants and that Americans are white or European in ancestry’. Master narratives, working as the filter that defines who is entitled to join the banquet of the making of American History, ‘narrow the definition of who is American’,¹⁶ therefore leaving many at the margins. Speaking from a peripheral position, then, Ragusa begins to develop her strategy of representation and figure of empowerment through the articulation of myth and memoir writing. Occupying a median position between her two families and communities, Ragusa identifies herself in the image of Persephone, the goddess doomed to relentlessly shuttle back and forth between two distant and rival worlds. The author, that is, perceives herself as the one who has to constantly mediate between Miriam’s and Gilda’s worlds. As she writes:

I had spent most of childhood and young adulthood traveling between their homes, trying and not always succeeding to negotiate the distance – cultural, historical, linguistic – between them. [...] I didn’t know how to stop shuttling, back and forth, back and forth.¹⁷

According to Ferraro, to overcome this impasse and to develop a process of cultural negotiation, Ragusa enacts three strategies: contesting, disordering and connecting.¹⁸ These three strategies are developed by Ferraro in relation to space and how the south (the Mediterranean area described in the memoir) is represented by Ragusa. Ferraro’s goal is to explore the way ‘Ragusa *riguarda* (i.e. looks back at and

¹⁵ *America in a Different Mirror: A Comparative Approach to History*, presented by Ronald Takaki (Hannover, MA: Microtraining Associates, 2007).

¹⁶ Takaki.

¹⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 19.

¹⁸ Ferraro, ‘Southern Encounters in the City’, p. 223.

take care of) the places'¹⁹ in order to come to terms with her hybrid identity. Although I believe that to look at the way the southern space is reconstructed by the author is important as it is useful to understand how the issue of race takes shape in the author's narrative, I will also look at these strategies in order to clarify the way Ragusa turns to the myth of Persephone as a means of identification. These three strategies, I will argue, are underpinned by a process of re-telling enacted by Ragusa. Re-telling is a modality Ragusa adopts when she revisits the myth of Persephone as a way to articulate her hybridity. This articulation moves from the quest of identity, rooted in her families' past, in particular in the author's female ancestors. The mode of retelling offers Ragusa a way to recreate these women's voices through the interplay of memory, myth, and writing.

2. Contesting: 'The mythology Of East Harlem' and practices of upward mobility

The strategy of 'contesting', Ferraro argues, 'consists in the ability to expose the fallacy of certain notions and perceptions of spaces that discourage any intercultural dialogue'.²⁰ The hotbed of Ragusa's discomfort during her childhood is situated in her perception of not belonging to either her paternal or maternal family; she felt like an outsider. In chapter six of her book, for instance, Ragusa describes the neighbourhood of the Italian East Harlem. She recalls the way her Italian American family extolled this place in their memories. To her family, East Harlem was a place so safe that the doors could be left open, where all the relatives were living at arm's length, and the children kept away from danger and violence. At that time, Ragusa was, instead, living in West Harlem. There, danger and violence were, conversely to East Harlem, an everyday

¹⁹ Ferraro, 'Southern Encounters in the City', p. 220.

²⁰ Ferraro, 'Southern Encounters in the City', p. 223.

reality. The author wishes she had a place for herself in that enchanted realm, where everything seemed to be so harmonious and serene. As she writes: 'I devour these words of safety, gorge myself in this fantasy of total community, total belonging. Imagine a place for myself in these rooms with their open door.'²¹ Nonetheless, the author looks back at these images from a present time and she is able to realize they were a mere fantasy of her Italian American family, an imaginary construction of a world where they could live peacefully and fulfil their migration dream. Ragusa feels the need 'to break the spell, refuse the seduction'²² of being caught in the fantasy of a world that was not real and in an immobile past and defines her family's memory of East Harlem as 'the mythology of East Harlem'.²³ In her memoir, one example of her attempt to contest the past is a conversation between the author and her uncle. To remember her uncle's words is important for Ragusa to understand and question the reality depicted by her Italian American family and their construction of borders against other ethnic groups that wanted to settle down in East Harlem. In the 1930s and 1940s Italian Americans patrolled the streets armed with bats to defend the borders of the Third Avenue from any Latinos. Ragusa, thus, reveals that the halo of intimacy that enshrouded the Italian neighbourhood was nothing more than another form of racism exhibited by the Italian community, as the following excerpt exemplifies:

My Uncle Tony once told me how when he was a student at Benjamin Franklin High School, a race riot broke out because African American students were being bused in from other side of Harlem. The fighting went on for days. We only brought our bats because they already had knives, Uncle Tony said. Finally, the progressive neighborhood politician Marcantonio invited Frank Sinatra and Paul Robeson to come address the students and try to broker a truce.²⁴

²¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 119.

²² Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 119.

²³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 119.

²⁴ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 120.

The racist tensions that divided the Italian American and African American communities, as well as America at large, affected the sense of safety Ragusa experienced during her youth and it consequently marked her process of identity construction. This is beautifully exemplified by Ragusa in her short film *fuori/outside* (1997), which retraces Gilda's life in America as the daughter of Italian immigrants.²⁵ The documentary opens with Gilda sitting at the kitchen table of her New Jersey house while Ragusa is filming her from outside a big window. The grandmother is aware of her niece's presence and seems to be at ease, even amused by the camera and the filming. Watching the video, however, one gets the feeling that Ragusa is spying inside the house; there is, indeed, a sense of discomfort (recreated also through the silence as there is no background music or sound). After Gilda's image blurs, we can glimpse Ragusa's image reflecting on the windowpane through which she is filming Gilda. Interestingly, Ragusa's image reflected on the window conveys the idea that she is not filming from outside anymore and she is now inside the house. As Ragusa confirmed in an interview, in that footage she was trying to capture this condition of being both inside and outside, 'the feeling of being an interloper, a spy, but also at home'.²⁶ If 'home' conveys the idea of safety and security, then Ragusa is contesting this preconceived notion in her works. As Giunta argues:

The family house, a paradoxical site of inclusion and exclusion, represents safety – the house is conceptualized by the family as a 'fortress' – and yet one cannot overestimate the danger that this same house posed for the young Ragusa's

²⁵ *fuori/outside*, dir. by Kym Ragusa (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1997).

²⁶ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix p. 273.

developing sense of identity, as she finds herself in enemy territory, in a troubling repetition of her maternal grandmother's experience in *Passing*.²⁷

If we look at the myth of Persephone, for instance, the scene of the abduction occurs right in the goddess's most familiar place, the lake of Pergusa, where she was used to playing with her nymph-friends. Ragusa reveals a narrative in which what we call and consider home, 'the site of inclusion [...] and safety', is a place where dangers and insecurity dwell. Ragusa, thus, calls into question biased assumptions which should be subjected to a revision. The process of revision then carries with it a degree of disordering. In this sense, the boundaries of what we know are reshaped and relocated. One poignant example that explains the strategy of disordering is the phenomenon of 'racial passing'.

3. Disordering: the strategy of *passing* and the ideology of race

Connected to the episode of the 'mythology of East Harlem' is the absurd phenomenon of the 'white flight' in which the Ragusas took part in 1975. The term 'white flight' describes a strategy of upward mobility enacted by the white middle-class, which, in their attempt to distance themselves from non-white people, moved from the Bronx to other suburbs – the Ragusas moved to New Jersey. For the author's family, the choice of moving sprang from the desire to finally have a big house and to move away from the

²⁷ Edvige Giunta, 'Figuring Race', in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 224–33 (p. 231). *Passing* is a documentary about her grandmother, Miriam, which Ragusa made in 1996. This film will be examined in the following section. We can also notice that the way Ragusa relates to and represents her perception of family and house suggests the Freudian idea of the uncanny or *unheimlich* – the familiar but strange. See Sigmund Freud, 'Das Unheimliche' (1919), 'trans.by Alix Strachey as 'The Uncanny'', in Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, 4 vols (New York: Basic Books, 1959), IV, 368–407.

increasing racial conflicts in the Bronx; it was ‘the culmination of an escape from the desperate poverty of southern Italy. [...] It held the promise of assimilation into the dominant white culture, in exchange for a final displacement of the “Old Country” as both home and ideal’.²⁸ While moving to New Jersey, the author, who at the time was nine, did not have a clear perception that her family was trying to move towards whiteness. In remembering, Ragusa questions this moment of her family story in order to gain control over deceiving memories and so to overcome their potential for nostalgia. In this sense, memory, which constitutes the main source for the author’s contestation, ‘distinguishes nostalgia, that longing for something to be as once it was, a kind of useless act, from that remembering that serves to illuminate and transform the present’.²⁹ As Brinda Mehta argues, the act of duplicating the past is a counterproductive action as it can only lead ‘to reinscribe communities within the confines of an archaic timelessness’. As Mehta notes, in order to be future-oriented the act of recovering the past ‘should lead to a dismantling and resituating of the very categories that structure and (im)mobilize the past’.³⁰ Thus, Ragusa denounces the paradox and the irony of that episode: driving to New Jersey, the Ragusas were moving away from Black and Spanish people while, at the same time, taking with them Kym, born of an African American woman, and Carmen, the author’s stepmother of Puerto Rican origins. Although, as Ragusa writes, ‘I don’t think any of us knew what we were in for’,³¹ she is aware today that the action of taking part in the white flight can be

²⁸ Kym Ragusa, ‘*Sangu du Sangu Meu: Growing Up Black and Italian in a Time of White Flight*’, in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 213–23 (pp. 218–19).

²⁹ Bell Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), p. 147, see also Brinda Mehta, *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women’s Writing* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. 78.

³⁰ Mehta, p. 78.

³¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 186.

inscribed in the broader strategy known under the label of ‘racial passing’.³² The term ‘passing’ refers to a strategy employed up until the beginning of the twentieth century by Black people, who used their light skin to pass as whites and enjoy the rights normally precluded from African Americans.³³ The phenomenon of *passing*, which foregrounds the ideology of race and proves its deceptive ‘unstable borders’, is an example of the strategy of disordering argued by Ferraro. *Disordering*, Ferraro explains, brings to light the inconsistencies and contradictions of socially constructed paradigms of race. This strategy in particular implies the racialization of an ethnic group and the expectations held by society in relation to that specific group. The strength of *The Skin between Us* lies in Ragusa’s ability to show how stereotypes and social expectations about African American and Italian American people are continuously subverted, thus calling into question the very notion of race. The memoir continuously contests and disorders the myths and social expectations related to the various ethnic groups living in America, and Italian and African Americans in particular. One important aspect of ‘disordering’ in the memoir is ‘racial passing’, insofar as it

creates social chaos [...] because it involves the undermining of a rigid system of racial classification. Passing disrupts a social and political order grounded on the expectation of the existence of two distinctive races and, hence, the act of a light-skinned black passing for white is to invite ontological, metaphorical, and

³² The episode of the ‘white flight’ is also described in Kym Ragusa’s short film *fuori/outside*. See also, Ragusa, ‘*Sangu du Sangu Meu*’.

³³ Before entering the language of sociology, the term ‘passing’ was used in the field of law in relation to African American people. According to Radall Kennedy: ‘passing is a reception that enables a person to adopt certain roles or identities from which he would be barred by prevailing social standards in the absence of his misleading conduct. The classic racial passer in the United States has been the “white Negro”: the individual whose physical appearance allows him to present himself as “white” but whose “black” lineage [...] makes him a Negro according to dominant racial rules.’ Randall Kennedy, ‘Racial Passing’, *Ohio State Journal*, 62.1145 (2001), 1–28 (p. 1).

semantic chaos – race becomes unstable, the world seems to escape categorical discipline, and language lacks its capacity to transmit meaning.³⁴

Passing was basically enacted as a strategy of survival and ‘adopted to escape damning racial identification’.³⁵ Those who passed, however, were often considered traitors to their own community of belonging. To embrace this strategy implies a betrayal of one’s own origins and the perpetration of white supremacy at the expense of the black community. For this reason, *passing* was considered unacceptable and frequently punished with isolation.³⁶

For Ragusa, this topic is highly personal. In 1997, the author filmed *Passing*,³⁷ a documentary that recounts an episode of racial discrimination (also included in the memoir) whose protagonist is Miriam, the author’s maternal African American grandmother. Partly German and partly African, Miriam has a light complexion. In 1959, Miriam was driving from New York to Florida with her partner at that time. On that occasion, the partner asked her to go into a diner to order some food to take away for their picnic. Once inside the restaurant, Miriam was interrogated by two customers who insistently provoked her with the question: ‘What side of the tracks are you from?’, as in, ‘to which community do you belong?’³⁸ As soon as Miriam realized the actual

³⁴ Anna Camaiti Hostert, *Passing: A Strategy to Dissolve Identities and Remap Differences*, trans. by Christine Marciasini (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), p. 10.

³⁵ Giunta, ‘Figuring Race’, p. 228.

³⁶ In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon states that ‘to speak means to be in a position to use [...] this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture’. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 17. Therefore, to act like the oppressor encourages the persistence of racist ideologies. As Nazneen Kane argues: ‘to co-opt the language of the colonizer is to co-opt racism and to “betray” one’s own self and culture, and to internalize one’s own inferiority.’ Nazneen Kane, ‘Frantz Fanon’s Theory of Racialization: Implications for Globalization, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 5 (2007), 353–62 (p. 357).

³⁷ *Passing*, dir. by Kym Ragusa (New York: Third World Newsreel, 1997).

³⁸ As Caterina Romeo explains, the train tracks separate the poor areas from the rich areas, but most importantly, they separate the white suburbs from the black ones. Caterina Romeo, ‘Una capacità quasi

meaning of the question, she also understood she was presented with the possibility of *passing* in order to stay safe, and get away from danger. Nonetheless, she courageously replied: ‘You’ve just served a nigger!’ As this episode shows, Miriam was a privileged, light-skinned black woman. Her cunning lies in her ability to elude the boundaries of that privilege, to lever it to escape violent forms of racism, which, conversely, people who had dark skin had to face. At the same time, however, Ragusa shows how Miriam is also ready to put it at risk in order to assert her African American identity and to stick to her fight for civil and human rights.

As Livia Tenzer has noted in her interview with Ragusa, Miriam did not really have much of a choice in defining herself as a black or white woman.³⁹ On that particular occasion, for instance, she could have chosen to pass as white, however, the train tracks that mark the division between the white and black suburbs dissolve any doubts about Miriam’s community of belonging. Ragusa’s film thus highlights her grandmother’s fierce act of refusing to step on the other side of the line to enjoy the privileges of the white community; Miriam chose to remain loyal to the African American community and its struggles. Another interesting point raised by Tenzer is that Gilda, the Italian American grandmother, also seems to enact a strategy of *passing* traceable in ‘her yearning for safety, for well-defined borders around her family, her house, her neighborhood’ which ‘involve maintaining a certain facade of identity’.⁴⁰ We can go further by suggesting that *passing* can be applied to the whole Italian American family of the author and to an extent to the Italian American community at large during

acrobatica’, in Kym Ragusa, *La Pelle che ci Separa*, trans. by Caterina Romeo and Clara Antonucci (Roma: Nutrimenti, 2008), pp. 249–70 (p. 259).

³⁹ Livia Tenzer, ‘Documenting Race and Gender: Kym Ragusa Discusses “Passing” and “Fuori/Outside”’, in *Looking Across the Lens: Women’s Studies and Film* (*Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 30.1/2 (2002)), pp. 213–20 (p. 216).

⁴⁰ Tenzer, p. 216.

the Eighties. If, in fact, by *passing* it is usually indicated the strategy of pretending to be ‘the Other’ in order to enjoy the benefits precluded by a prevailing community to a minority group, then we can interpret the ‘white flight’ as a strategy of *passing* as well. Ahmed considers *passing* as a chance to escape the yoke of the social classification of races, understanding passing as ‘a possibility of hybridization’.⁴¹ Ahmed suggests that to be identified as either white or black always carries a certain degree of inauthenticity, as the subject is not properly either of these; and could at once be either of these. The strategy of passing, thus, foregrounds the crisis of identity and its unstable ground. The crisis of identity is perceived from both sides: from the side of the person that looks, and from the side of the person who is looked at. In the episode mentioned above, this crisis was indeed perceived by Miriam, and also by the customers of the diner who asked their question and stated their authority as whites. What is important when looking at the phenomenon of *passing* is that this strategy opens a door to be crossed both ways. The person who thinks of him/herself as white can feel safe behind his/her authority; the person who successfully performs the *passing* has managed to deceive ‘authority’. Moreover, as Hostert has noted, for the passing to be successful, it is crucial the people who enact it are never unmasked.⁴² In this sense, it is a double win for the ‘tricker’ and the ‘tricked’, who will never know s/he has been conned.

In relation to Ragusa, the crisis of identity related to the colour of her skin is a constant of her childhood and adolescence. As she writes: ‘My skin always caused me trouble – it was always too dark or too light, always a problem.’⁴³ A character of the family who shares a similar destiny with Ragusa is the author’s African American great-

⁴¹ Sara Ahmed, “‘She’ll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She’s Turned into a Nigger’: Passing through Hybridity”, in *Performativity and Belonging*, ed. by Vikki Bell (London, Thousand Oaks; New Delhi: Sage, 1999), pp. 163–74 (p. 88).

⁴² See Camaiti Hostert, p. 11.

⁴³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 109.

grandmother, Mae. As Ragusa writes: ‘Mae was a marked woman. Marked by the pigment in her skin, which set her apart, especially from her blonde mother and sisters and ultimately from her own light-skinned, red-haired daughter.’⁴⁴ Mae is Miriam’s mother and the only one who, among all of the female characters of her African American lineage, did not inherit blonde hair and blue eyes from her German mother. As a young woman, Mae used to sneak into white people’s parties with her sisters and dance wildly. She had five husbands and everyone thought the reason for her scarce morality was, without doubt, linked to her black skin. Again, here, we can see the way the skin establishes boundaries and social classification. As Ahmed argues, the skin ‘as a telos’⁴⁵ can determine the subject’s limits and confines. These boundaries, however, are drawn by the other’s gaze that validates the ‘truth’ of that subject, as this following example will clarify.

Mae, together with her sisters, used to enact the *passing* to enter exclusive parties. These events were known as ‘paper-bag parties’ organized by the upper-class black African community.⁴⁶ The paper-bag parties established hierarchies also among the African American community: light-skinned African Americans could, in fact, exercise and display their power over African Americans who had a dark complexion.⁴⁷ One was allowed in only if his/her skin was no darker than a paper bag hanging on the door. Another way to test people’s whiteness mentioned by Miriam and reported by Ragusa in the memoir was that of the comb. To be allowed to enter the party, one had to be able to comb his/her hair with a fine-toothed comb hanging on the door. Although

⁴⁴ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ Ahmed, ‘Animated Borders’, p. 50.

⁴⁶ Audrey Elisa Kerr, ‘The Paper Bag Principle: Of the Myth and the Motion of Colorism’, *The Journal of American Folklore*, 118.469 (2005), 271–89.

⁴⁷ See 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. by Tiziana de Rogatis and others (Pisa: Pacini, 2013), pp. 39–54, and Romeo, *Una capacità quasi acrobatica*.

the *passing* was considered as a muckraking praxis, Miriam's aunts used to go to these events and were all able to get in without much trouble. Only Mae 'would have just made it into those paper-bag parties', but once inside:

Not only was she the dark one in this setting, but she was fast and reckless, too. She danced and drank and swore like a sailor, and had more lovers than anyone could count. In her pale, hardworking, churchgoing family, this wildness must have been associated with her darkness, as if her visible African blood were an announcement, and indeed the cause, of her moral lapses.⁴⁸

As Tiziana de Rogatis argues, Mae is not a black woman; she *becomes* black because she is not as white as her sisters or her German mother, and she will not be as white as her own daughter is, 'una profezia dell'identità' (an identity prophecy),⁴⁹ that reveals the function of skin 'as a telos' as spoken of by Ahmed. Therefore, Mae develops her black identity in opposition to what everyone expected her to be.⁵⁰ As Ragusa writes: 'Mae's rebellion grew out of this emotional exile – in rebelling, she became the very thing that her skin was supposed to determine.'⁵¹ Thus the skin takes shape as the 'site of social crisis and instability'⁵² and also as the 'means by which beings are constituted as separate and distinct'.⁵³ The strategy of disordering the boundaries of race, as exemplified by the episode of passing illustrated here, suggests the implication of race as a structure of social oppression.⁵⁴ Ragusa's employment of passing shows how 'race is an exceedingly slippery concept' as well as 'hard to pin down' as race is

⁴⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 68.

⁴⁹ de Rogatis, p. 45.

⁵⁰ de Rogatis.

⁵¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 68.

⁵² Ahmed, 'Animated Borders', p. 47.

⁵³ Ahmed, 'Animated Borders', p. 52.

⁵⁴ See David R. Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 2.

[...] riddled with apparent contradictions. For example, while race is a *dynamic* phenomenon rooted in political struggle, it is commonly considered a *fixed* characteristic of human populations; while it does not exist in terms of human biology, people routinely look to the human body for evidence about racial identity; while it is a biological *fiction*, it is nonetheless a social *fact*.⁵⁵

Race, moreover, seems to be inseparable from social status. The customers of the diner, in fact, keep asking Miriam, ‘What side of the tracks are you from?’ because this division also served to distinguish poor from rich people. According to Giunta, Ragusa’s *Passing* reveals ‘one way in which race is socially constructed, as in the exchange between the customers and the woman, who proudly claims as her own that racial identity which stigmatizes her’.⁵⁶ Informed by a history that divided whites from whites, blacks from blacks, whites from blacks, America at large, and her own two families, Ragusa grows up with a strong desire to not be recognized at all, to vanish, to be the ‘*Persephone nusquam*’ of Claudian’s memory. The urge the author describes as ‘that feeling, all too familiar, of wanting to climb out of my skin, to be invisible’⁵⁷ is the simple desire to cross the borders of cultural and racial expectations located in the shades of colour that her skin reflects, and to evade the barriers of race.

Aware that differences cannot be ignored or cancelled, Ragusa’s memoir questions the social structures that allow the persistence of difference and social injustices, rather than leveraging difference to bring people together and create cohesion. In the following section, we will examine one possible way to reconcile differences. This, as Ferraro argues, lies in the opportunity envisioned by Ragusa to enact the strategy of *connecting*.

⁵⁵ Angela James, ‘Making Sense of Race and Racial Classification’, *Race & Society*, 4 (2001), 235–47 (p. 236).

⁵⁶ Giunta, ‘Figuring Race’, p. 226.

⁵⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 18.

4. Connecting: building a transcultural bridge between Africa, America, and Europe

In the previous section, we have seen how the strategy of disordering has helped Ragusa to show how race is a social construct that can be turned upside down and used to address the hypocrisy linked to the ideology of race. The construction of race is a crucial issue for Ragusa who, for most of her young life, has experienced alienation from her families, from the different school environments where she was educated, and from the neighbourhoods in which she grew up. Ragusa's perception of racial identity as precarious is recorded in her documentary *fuori/outside*, as well as articulated in her essay *Sangu du Sangu meu*, and finally expanded in her memoir *The Skin between Us*. In these works, Ragusa recounts that her father did not announce her birth to his parents. He was afraid they would have never accepted Kym as their grandchild, as she was the fruit of his contested relationship with an African American woman. As her father explained to her:

*You have to understand [...] My mother was from a different world. She couldn't get her head around having a black grandchild, so she just saw you as Italian. Because I was light, I added. He looked at me a little impatiently. Yeah, I guess so. But what if I wasn't so light? I insisted. It's over now, and in the end they loved you. That's all that matters, isn't it?*⁵⁸

Ragusa's question 'what if I wasn't so light?' foregrounds the author's fears that her belonging to her Italian American family would have always been precarious and that

⁵⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 153.

one day Gilda might have realized her niece was black, and thus not one of them. This fear was also fostered by what Ragusa defines as the ‘farce about her origins’.⁵⁹ Before being introduced as Gilda’s legitimate granddaughter, she was presented to the Ragusas as Carmen’s niece. As Carmen and Kym are light-skinned, the association between the two did not seem so far-fetched. When the author learnt about this comedy of errors, however, she felt ‘devalued’ and writes:

[...] as if *I* had been the error, the mistake that threw the wrench into the story of my family’s American Dream. No matter how ‘rebellious’ my father may have been in his youth, his position would never be questioned. ... Yet, I would learn, over and over again, how tenuous my own position was.⁶⁰

As these excerpts show, feelings of a flimsy belonging pervaded the author’s life since she was a child. In particular, these feelings intensified when she was enrolled in a multicultural school, attended by children of different ethnic backgrounds. As her mother told her: ‘*I wanted you to be exposed to other children who were different, like you.*’⁶¹ But even in that setting, where ‘being different’ was the norm, Ragusa was addressed by her schoolmates as ‘whitey’.⁶² Moreover, the greatest paradox of that multicultural school, as well as cause of personal confusion for the young Ragusa, was the textbook she had to study, *Fun with Dick and Jane*. The book portrayed a typical upper-class happy family life and had very little to do with the West Harlem suburb. The characters were all white, blonde with blue eyes. Dick and Jane’s mother was the iconic image of tender love, wearing her apron and always in the kitchen, whereas their

⁵⁹ Ragusa, *fuori/outside*.

⁶⁰ Ragusa, *Sangu du Sangu Meu*, p. 217.

⁶¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 155.

⁶² Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 156.

father smoked a pipe. The book showed a reality that was at odds with Ragusa and the other children's life experiences. As Ragusa says in her memoir:

I couldn't reconcile the world of *Fun With Dick and Jane* with our Harlem classroom and our black, brown, and yellow skin. [...] At such young age I couldn't see that there was something wrong with the book, that it excluded most children in the 'real' world. It was we who were somehow wrong, because we didn't look like Dick and Jane or live in a house like theirs.⁶³

Besides the school setting, Ragusa had to fight to fit in also in other social contexts. In *fuori/outside*, she remembers one remarkable episode of racism (also included in the memoir) she experienced. As a child, Ragusa was playing with her Italian American cousin, Donna, and Donna's friends, in the Bronx. Some guys pointed at Ragusa and said to Donna, 'I think there is a nigger here', to which Donna replied, 'No, it's my cousin Kym. It's just dark outside.' And then Ragusa says: 'I didn't know what the word nigger meant, but I knew it separated me from everybody else.'⁶⁴ This episode shows how Ragusa experienced on her own skin, not only, how 'dynamics of class and race operate in social as well as familial contexts',⁶⁵ but also how these can constitute a site for cultural negotiation, as the memoir shows. Such sites of negotiation can be located in the already mentioned 'third space' which represents the *locus* where hybridity is articulated. If we have seen that for Caperna Lloyd, the 'third space' was a dimension that triggered the author's process of self-identification, for Ragusa, Bhabha's notion becomes also the space in which the hegemony of cultural structures

⁶³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, pp. 157–58.

⁶⁴ Ragusa, *fuori/outside*.

⁶⁵ Giunta, 'Figuring Race', p. 225.

and practices of colonial narratives collapse and in which new identities and new narratives can rise from the debris. As Bhabha argues:

For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge.⁶⁶

Bhabha’s notion of hybridity as a site of resistance and creativity can be of use to analyse the strategy of connecting enacted by Ragusa. In particular, this strategy, although underpinning the narrative of the memoir, is most of all visible in its prologue, set on the ferry from Messina to Palermo. Ferraro explains that through ‘connecting’ Ragusa envisions a possibility to create a bridge between Miriam’s world and that of Gilda. The two women represent the author’s source for understanding her own biracial identity as revolving around the African American and Italian American poles. Although, Ragusa says, ‘I had spent most of my childhood and young adulthood traveling between their homes, trying and not always succeeding to negotiate the distance [...] between them’,⁶⁷ this possibility materializes not in America, but in Sicily. This island, geographically located between Europe and Africa, strikes Ragusa with its majestic beauty deriving from its history characterized by centuries of different colonizations. As she writes:

In America the descendants of southern Italian immigrants learned only to see shame in this complex heritage, not beauty, not strength. But when I looked at the faces of the people around me, I saw my father’s face and Gilda’s face. And I saw my own.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Jonathan Rutherford, ‘Interview with Homi Bhabha’, p. 211.

⁶⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 19.

⁶⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p.234.

In the main Sicilian city of Palermo, Ragusa experiences the way difference can coexist harmoniously even through contrast. During her stay in Palermo, the author visits the Arab neighbourhood of La Kalsa.⁶⁹ As a friend told her, this is '[...] *your Harlem – we are the blacks of Italy. And La Kalsa is the Harlem of Palermo*'.⁷⁰ In this place that resonates so much with her childhood life experience, Ragusa envisions a way to create a channel of communication between Gilda and Miriam and, precisely, she finds it 'in the interconnected spatialities of race and belonging beyond national boundaries, [...] and between fair, dark and darker-skinned people'.⁷¹ In La Kalsa, Ragusa witnessed 'the affirmation of the mixed and multiple history and ethnicity of Sicily that was currently being reflected by the presence of newer immigrants of color'.⁷² The author saw young Bengali girls speaking Sicilian, as well as young African and Sicilian kids playing soccer: 'some of the boys were African, their skin black as obsidian against the olive light brown skin of the Sicilians.'⁷³ Mesmerized by the contrast of different skin colours and the sound of the dialect on the Bengali girls' lips that so much reminded her of the dialect spoken by her paternal grandfather, Luigi, Ragusa writes: 'For a moment I lost track of where I was – was this Palermo, or Cairo, or Lagos, or Harlem?'⁷⁴ La Kalsa, then, becomes a stage of representation for the author who projects herself into that multicultural space. At the same time, however, the Arab neighbourhood risks becoming another myth for Ragusa, like East Harlem for her Italian American family. As the author herself has recently confirmed:

⁶⁹ La Kalsa is a neighbourhood of Palermo in which it is possible to visit several monuments built during the Arab domination of Sicily between 827–1091.

⁷⁰ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 235.

⁷¹ Ferraro, 'Southern Encounters in the City', p. 226.

⁷² Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix, p. 271.

⁷³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 237.

⁷⁴ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 237.

I think I may have idealized that moment. Yes, there was familiarity among the youth playing soccer in the community that day, but then and now there have been horrible instances of racist violence and structural discrimination that affect the everyday realities of African, Asian, and Muslim immigrants in Italy.⁷⁵

Comparing Ragusa's mythicized image of La Kalsa as narrated in her book with her acknowledgement of the hardship immigrants face daily in Italy is revealing of how much the author needed to find productive models of coexistence, models of connecting and reconciling the antagonistic ethnic seeds that inform her dual identity. It is not a coincidence that Ragusa explores these models in Palermo. As she writes:

I had longed to see this, the ancient chaotic capital of Sicily, the site of thousands of years of invasion and violation, accommodation and amalgamation. It had been claimed by the Greeks, Romans, Phoenicians, Arabs, Normans, Spanish, and French. And still Palermo stood, scarred, enriched, defiant. [...] layers of history, exposed as raw nerves, on the surface of buildings, in the dark eyes of the people I met. Cathedrals that had once been mosques that had in their turn once been temples of the old gods.⁷⁶

Palermo, a city scarred by centuries of aggression, is indeed, to the eyes of the author, a city that has undergone physical and linguistic changes over time, but also one which, throughout the centuries, has seen differences interact and build upon each other. In Palermo Ragusa sees the power that can originate from the courage to stand fiercely where hegemonic narratives have attempted to silence the past. Palermo, then, represents the site where she is able to shorten the distance between her African American and Italian American families. After contesting and disordering the myths

⁷⁵ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix p. 271.

⁷⁶ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 234.

underpinning the construction of race as the cradle of her anxiety of belonging, Ragusa turns to Sicily as the preferred site for reconciling differences. Sicily, besides being characterized by its rich history of hybridization, is also the place where the myth of Persephone is set. As the author explains, the myth is relevant to her because, among all of the universal themes it epitomizes, it is also an expression of ‘the longing for connection’.⁷⁷ The myth bears powerful resonance with Italian American artists and writers because

The myth of Demeter and Persephone is [...] rich [...], it contains so many themes that are significant to women: motherhood, daughterhood, rape, patriarchy vs matriarchy, the search for independence and the longing for connection. It becomes specifically meaningful for Italian American women artists and writers because the story is set in Sicily, it comes from the very ground our ancestors walked, comes from some kind of collective unconscious that developed in that landscape.⁷⁸

The myth and the reconstruction of the myth help the author to foster her memory and to lever this in order to write her personal story of identity quest. In *The Skin between Us*, the interplay of myth and memory is the connecting gate that empowers Ragusa to give voice to her struggles. As the author stated:

In my memoir, myth, fantasy, and memory are facets of one another, complements to one another. We create myth out of fragments of stories that we need for survival, for nourishment. We have little memory, of an event, an ancestor, so we imagine, we embellish. My great-grandmother Louisa was for me a mythic character – though I only know a little about her life, I imagined her as a powerful matriarch, a magical healer linked to generations of women like her back into the time of the myths themselves. I needed her to be larger than life in order to create a space for myself in my family's narrative – she, the healer, beyond the realities of racism of the times, was able to bring me into the fold. My portrayal of Miriam, on the other hand, came from a deep desire to remember her as clearly as possible, to memorialize her. Fantasy gives color and texture to both

⁷⁷ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix, p. 269.

⁷⁸ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix, p. 269.

myth and memory. How do we make real what we don't know directly? We create characters, images.⁷⁹

Ragusa's interlacing of myth and memory reminds us of Gianbattista Vico in *The New Science*. For Vico, fantasy was, in fact, 'extended or compound memory'.⁸⁰ In this sense, myth as both memory and fantasy is not a mere story, but a narrative that gives us back a way to make sense of the world. In classical myths, for instance, it is possible to read and learn about class struggles, religions, rituals, as well as hybrid figures (i.e. mermaids, fauns, centaurs). This is what emerges from Ragusa's story describing the racial conflicts, the hard process of cultural negotiation, as well as the issue of hybrid identities. Thus, understanding myths (which Vico calls fables) is crucial to interpret the unfolding of time and make sense of our present. The myth becomes a tool to investigate our society, as in Ragusa's work it is a tool to compose a process of hybrid identity construction. For Ragusa, imagination, then, is memory – extended or compound – and it is crucial for her to understand her Self socially, historically, as well as geographically.

In Ragusa's memoir, therefore, memories are stitched up through the fabrication of characters and mythic *figuras*. Through this process she can fill in the gaps of memory and enter the darkness of the unknown.

5. Re-telling: re-inventing Persephone in Hades' kingdom

⁷⁹ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December, 2014). See appendix, p. 270.

⁸⁰ Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, *The New Science of Gianbattista Vico: Unabridged Translation of the Third Edition (1744) With the Addition of Practice the New Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 75.

The Skin between Us presents a circular narrative structure framed by the epilogue and the prologue in which Ragusa writes about her journey in Sicily, where she travelled in order to make her documentary about the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone. The *incipit* of the narrative plot is the conclusion of the diegetic temporal axis so that the narration chronicles the memoir's story, creating a temporal inversion. The narratological representation of the temporal inversion is articulated through the regressive recovery of the events. In the prologue, we see the protagonist-narrator standing on a ferry while crossing the Messina Strait. The sky and the sea are clear blue; it is a beautiful day but she does not feel at ease. The reader does not know what is going to happen and follows the narrator, who is hanging on to the rail to ease the heavy feeling of nausea caused by the flurry of the sea below her. The author reveals the reason that propelled the journey from America to Italy and which takes shape as a quest for personal and cultural roots.

At this point Ragusa writes her story by moving the temporal axis to the past and describes her childhood in black Harlem with her African American grandmother, Miriam, and her adolescence in New Jersey with her Italian American family and especially her relationship with her grandmother, Gilda. The memoir, then, closes with the epilogue set in Sicily and its capital, Palermo. Although the author's paternal family migrated from Sicily to Calabria, Sicily is still the link that makes it possible for Ragusa to explore her African American and her Italian American origins, as well as to relive and re-tell the myth of Persephone. Ragusa closes the Prologue with the question: 'What home was I searching for that chilly May morning on my way to Sicily? [...] I had to come this far to know that I needed to find my own way back.'⁸¹ Ragusa's 'way

⁸¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 19.

back', however, is not so much a physical desire to return to Harlem, a place where she can feel safe; rather, it is a path paved by her memory. The remembering of her life as a child divided and contended between Miriam and Gilda; the meaning of the division between the two women; the racism, hatred, and then the deep and sincere sisterhood between her grandmothers. These snapshots of her past guide Ragusa through the dark and hidden corners of her memory fraught with relentless questions about her biracial identity and her crisis of belonging

In the first chapter of the *Skin between Us* these feelings are prompted by the description of a picture in which Miriam, Gilda, and Ragusa are sitting together at the dinner table on Thanksgiving Day in 1996. The image of that friendship and mutual respect established itself after many years and several episodes of reciprocal racism. That image, thus, is a consolation to Ragusa: an instant capable of filling the gap of years of emptiness and separation that divided her two families. Starting from this picture, which, significantly, is the only one included by the author in the book, the story narrated by Ragusa unfolds the struggles and negotiation that lies behind these women's skins, 'the skin between us: a border, a map, a blank page'.⁸² The blank page constitutes the site where Ragusa can articulate her own version of her biracial experience. The blank space, where new and different narratives can be possible, is a recurrent theme in Ragusa's imagination as we can see in the closing line of *fuori/outside*, in which Ragusa says: 'There is so much of the story that is not set in stone.'⁸³ The mode of re-telling enables Ragusa to fill in the page and to carve the stone. In the memoir, the re-telling is made possible thanks to the recovery of memory and the myth of Persephone, as well as in the interplay between memory and myth. The

⁸² Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 25.

⁸³ Ragusa, *fuori/outside*.

recovery of the myth of Persephone is functional to the development of the story and of paramount importance to the author.

Ragusa became acquainted with the story of the myth thanks to her grandmother Miriam, who told the story of Persephone and Demeter to Ragusa when she was a child. For Miriam it was important her niece remembered that story as the myth took place in Sicily, the land where the author's family originated from. Therefore, Ragusa grew up nurturing Persephone's story as if it was her own and as a key to understanding part of her biracial identity. In 'The Value of Difference' Jeffrey Weeks argues that individuals are constituted by different identities, and these can even be conflicting with each other. However, he argues that:

Identity is about belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core of your individuality.⁸⁴

In relation to her own identity, the whole memoir shows Ragusa's struggles to find that stable core articulated by Weeks and her feelings of 'in-betweenness' originating from the author's perception of not belonging to either the Italian American or to the African American community. In the memoir, Ragusa defines herself as a mimic subject 'not exactly a black girl, nor exactly an Italian girl'.⁸⁵ Ragusa's fear and vulnerability, attached to her hybrid identity, are experienced by the reader throughout the memoir. For instance when the author is on the ferry, she thinks the other passengers are looking at her:

What must have I looked like to them? A woman alone, already an oddity. Already suspect. My dark corkscrew hair was pulled back, something I had learned to do whenever I went someplace where I did not want to stand out, which

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Weeks, 'The Value of Difference', p. 88.

⁸⁵ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p.85.

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.⁸⁶

Ragusa perceives the other's gaze as the measure for her identity. It is this gaze that contributes to the fragmentation of the author's self. She cannot claim a position for herself inside her two communities; she is 'not exactly a black girl, nor exactly an Italian girl'.⁸⁷

If Weeks understands identity as the possibility of claiming one's sense of belonging, as well as what represents the most stable component of one's individuality, Hall argues that 'instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, [...] we should think, instead, of identity as a "production", which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'.⁸⁸ Identity, then, is fluid and dynamic, and never identical to itself. Ragusa represents identity as a process, or in Hall's terms as a 'production'. In her interview with Clara Antonucci, Ragusa declared that:

L'identità è un processo e siccome ho passato gran parte della mia vita tra la comunità italoamericana e quella afroamericana, senza però essere completamente parte dell'una nè dell'altra, la sfida sia stata riuscire davvero a sentire di appartenere a entrambe. ... Ma a un certo punto, ho sentito di essere fortemente legata a tutte e due e alla mia famiglia [...] e così è nato in me un senso di identità più ampio, che va al di là dei legami di sangue'.

(Identity is a process and since I have spent most of my life between the Italian American and the African American communities, without feeling to fully belong

⁸⁶ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, pp. 18–9.

⁸⁷ Ragusa's strategies of mimicry, especially the one that levers her hair, is at the core of Edvige Giunta's essay, 'Figuring Race'. Such a strategy is also central in the Italian translation of *The Skin Between Us*, as shown in the photograph Caterina Romeo has chosen for the front cover of the book.

⁸⁸ Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', p. 222.

to any of the two, the challenge was to truly achieve that sense of belonging to both. [...] but at some point, I realised I was strongly connected to both of the communities and my families [...] and therefore, I developed a wider sense of identity, one that goes beyond the blood ties.)⁸⁹

Identity, Hall suggests, materializes through representation; narratives we tell to pin ourselves down in certain moments of our lives.⁹⁰ In order to explore and articulate her sense of identity, as well as to overcome her need for origins and cultural roots, the author represents herself turning to the myth of Persephone. As she writes:

As I grew older, long after the age of bedtime stories, I began to respond almost instinctively to this myth – as if I were growing into it. Not because of its origin in a distant place to which I was somehow connected, but because I saw myself in the figure of Persephone, the good girl destined to live a life split in two. A girl who is always leaving, whose every homecoming is a goodbye.⁹¹

In Ragusa's imagination, as in that of many other Italian American female authors, Persephone is the forerunner of the migrant: she who always has to adjust to two different worlds. There is, however, another aspect which is linked to the image of Persephone and which resonates with the author. Persephone is an in-between subject and goddess of the *limen* par excellence. Therefore, she is symbolic of the condition of liminality experienced by Ragusa. The word liminal, which derives from the Latin *limen*, means 'threshold'. As Ferraro has noted, the image of the threshold holds a double interpretation as it refers to the idea of constraint when one is incapable of

⁸⁹ Kym Ragusa, 'Fare Memoria delle Storie Perdute', interview with Clara Antonucci in *Leggendaria*, 14.80 (2010), 45–47 (p. 46).

⁹⁰ Stuart Hall, 'Fantasy, Identity, Politics', in *Cultural Remix: Theories of Politics and the Popular*, ed. by Erica Carter, James Donald, and Judith Squires (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1995), pp. 63–69 (p. 65).

⁹¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 107.

crossing it, but also as a site of possible resistance.⁹² The term ‘liminality’ was first employed by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, and further developed by Victor Turner.⁹³ Turner argues that the subjects who undergo a rite of passage occupy the uncertain position of in-between, a ‘no longer and not yet’ position. (For instance, Persephone occupies an in-between space when she is on the threshold between the upper and the underworld, undergoing the passage from girlhood into womanhood.) In *The Skin between Us*, Ragusa is undergoing a passage from the fragmentation of her own self to the gaining of wholeness, of selfhood. The switch in Ragusa’s perception of her identity is expressed by the author’s reworking of the myth of Persephone. What are the implications, however, of the act of turning to mythology and rewriting it? Here, the act of retelling foregrounds how marginal subjects, like women, can claim agency by telling *their* version of the story versus *his*-story. As Adrienne Rich suggests, women should not ‘pass on a tradition but [...] break its hold over us’.⁹⁴ The further question is: ‘what would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?/ The world would split open.’⁹⁵ As we have seen so far, Ragusa has lacked agency over the definition of her identity, often trying to be a ‘Persephone *nusquam*’ in both her families and school environments. Through the myth of Persephone, however, the author finds a means of empowerment to address ‘the conflict between the claims of the self and the claims of others’,⁹⁶ ‘to split the world open’, and to inhabit liminality.

⁹² Evelyn Ferraro, ‘Moving Thresholds: Liminal Writing in the Italian Diaspora’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, Brown University, 2010), p. 7.

⁹³ Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960); Turner, “‘Betwixt and Between’”.

⁹⁴ Adrienne Rich, ‘When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision’, *College English*, 34.1 (1972), 18–30 (p. 19).

⁹⁵ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Speed of Darkness*, pp. 102–03, as quoted in Blau Du Plessis, p. 288.

⁹⁶ Blau Du Plessis, p. 281.

During her childhood Ragusa identified herself with the image of Persephone as recounted by Homer. Therefore, she identified with the Persephone doomed to divide her life between her mother and her husband without being able to claim agency. Once the author grows up, she realizes that all her journeys from Harlem to New Jersey, from one community to another, actually enriched her life. As an adult, Ragusa identifies herself again with the goddess Persephone, however, this time she turns to the Persephone depicted by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*. Conversely to Homer's depiction of Persephone, in Ovid's version the goddess is neither forced nor tricked to eat the seeds of the pomegranate which will tie her to Hades' underworld; rather, it is she who willingly eats the seeds and therefore consciously agrees to share her life with her husband in his kingdom. As Ragusa writes:

In most versions of the myth, Hades forces her to eat the seeds, and Persephone recounts this violation helplessly and tearfully to Demeter. But in Ovid's *Matamorphoses*, Persephone eats the fruit herself, stealing a pomegranate from a tree in Hades' vast, lush garden. She breaks open the rough red skin of the fruit, and puts the seven seeds into her mouth.

I like this image of Persephone better, choosing her own fate.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 238.



Figure 8 - *Proserpine*, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, 1874.

Through the re-telling of the myth, Ragusa is challenging her liminal position of ‘stuck in-between’ and is creating her own site of resistance. As mentioned, Turner argues that liminal subjects occupy the uncertain position of ‘no longer and not yet’. Nonetheless,

he adds, the site of liminality can also constitute a ‘free and experimental region of culture’.⁹⁸ Caught in-between, in fact, the liminal subject can articulate her experience in a creative way. The creative way, in Ragusa’s memoir, unfolds in ‘the third space’, which is an in-between space opened up by the act of remembering. In this sense, ‘memory becomes a voice of mediation that negotiates and occupies the liminal space between loss and recovery’.⁹⁹ Memoir, then, in providing a place in which memory can be articulated through writing, becomes a site of possible reconciliation. Memoir is, thus, ‘the locus of intellectual and cultural production’.¹⁰⁰ It also becomes the site where individual and collective memories interact, and proves the act of remembering can be a positive experience. Memory, that is, can help defeat stasis and crystallization when ‘by entering into a fruitful dialogue with the past one becomes able to revive the fossils that are buried within oneself and are part of one’s ancestors’.¹⁰¹

In *The Skin between Us*, the implications of being able to rework and re-tell the myth enable Ragusa to give voice to her memory, to the women of her families, as well as to the experiences of African American and Italian American people. In the Ovidian version of Persephone, Ragusa writes, Persephone willingly eats the seeds of the pomegranate in order to stay next to her husband. However, it is not actually so. Ovid introduces the character of Ascalaphus, the son of Acheron and the nymph Orphne, who catches Persephone in action and frames her. As the story goes:

Proserpine can see the sky again – on one condition: that in the world below, she has not taken food to her lips. This is the Fates’ edict. ‘These were his words. And yet, though

⁹⁸ Victor Turner, ‘Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Simbology’, in *The Anthropological Study of Human Play*, ed. by Eward Norbeck and John Buettner-Janusch (= The Rice University Studies, 60.3 (1974)), pp. 53–92 (p. 61).

⁹⁹ Mehta, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ Mehta, p. 7.

¹⁰¹ Kirsten Holst Petersen and Anna Rutherford, ‘Fossil and Psyche’, in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 139–42 (p. 139).

Ceres wanted to bring her daughter back, the Fates prevented Proserpine's return, for she had broken her fast: the girl, in all her innocence, while she was wandering through a well-kept garden within the underworld, from a bent branch had plucked a pomegranate. She had taken – peeling away its pale rind – seven seeds and pressed them to her lips. No one had seen that act of hers – except Ascalaphus [...] He saw her taste those seeds: denouncing her, he thwarted her return to earth.¹⁰²

Persephone, in her act of picking the fruit and eating the seeds on the sly, is acting mischievously as she is disobeying the order of the Parcae not to eat the fruit, on the penalty that she will not be able to leave the underworld. The poet's version astutely captures all the naivety inscribed in the character of the goddess, who, after all, is still a child. Nonetheless, Ragusa opts for the Ovidian version as it provides an insight into Persephone's experience. In the Homeric version, although the story is centred on the goddess's abduction, very little, if anything, is told about her. Therefore, turning to the Ovidian version, Ragusa reads Persephone's action as one of rebellion. The author is re-telling and re-imagining Persephone as a courageous woman fighting and resisting adversity, like all the members of her families and herself have done. The modality of re-telling strengthens the strategies of contesting, disordering, and connecting. Ragusa is, once again, rewriting pre-existing narratives in order to define alternative settings into which to inscribe her story and that of the women of her families. Only through this action can Ragusa imagine 'the in-between space that I, too, would inhabit'.¹⁰³ As the author states, the Ovidian version of Persephone underscores 'the shift from victim to one who chooses, even in circumstances that are still oppressive'. Because of this, the myth 'offered a window, a glimpse of freedom even within the strictures of a male-

¹⁰² Allen Mandelbaum, *The Metamorphoses of Ovid: A New Verse Translation* (San Diego: Bt Bound, 1995), p. 168.

¹⁰³ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 67.

dominated, violently restrictive world'.¹⁰⁴ The urge of re-telling also occurred in a previous chapter of the memoir when Ragusa re-tells the story of Sybela Owens, the first ancestor of her African American family. Sybela was a mulatto woman, working as a slave on a plantation in Maryland in the mid-1880s. According to the memories passed down among the women of the African American family of Ragusa's, Sybela gave birth to two pale children, fruit of the violence of her master's son. Sybela's master, however, realising his son was falling in love with the woman, decided to have her and her children sold to another plantation to separate them. But the father of the children took them and Sybela before they got sold, moved to Pittsburgh, and settled in Homewood.

Although this story revolves around Sybela, Ragusa writes: 'I could never find *her* in the story.'¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the author re-tells Sybela and what her ancestor must have felt like during that time:

So I imagine. Imagine her flight. When the white man opens the cabin door, Sybela has already gathered up a few essentials, pulled the children from their sleep. They have been planning this moment for months, ever since he told her the news that his father was going to sell her and the children. She has endured many things in her brief life: untold hours labouring for white people in their white mansions, scrubbing their dirty clothes, serving their endless courses of food, cleaning their chamber pots. She has been cursed by plantation mistresses enraged by the similarities of her skin to their own, helpless at the sight of so many nearly white children in the fields, the scullery, and the slave quarters who look just like their husbands. She has been raped by one white man who tells her that he loves her as he pushes his way into her night after night – most likely others have tried the same thing, perhaps her own father among them. All this she has survived, but she will not tolerate being torn away from her children.

¹⁰⁴ Interview with Kym Ragusa, (13 December 2014). See appendix, p. 269.

¹⁰⁵ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 71.

Sybela and the white man would have each carried a child, [...] ran through the night, feeling their way through the tangle of leaves and branches, [...] wondering how close behind the master's men and their hounds would be, wondering if they would really make it to the other side.¹⁰⁶

The stories of Sybela and Persephone are essential narratives for Ragusa. By re-inventing these women and re-writing their lives, she can reinvent her own story; she inserts herself into the liminal space that allows creativity to emerge. But most importantly, these women's stories speak to Ragusa of the women of her families and the abuse of power they all underwent. As she writes:

Sybela and her unnamed mother, Luisa and Gilda, Miriam and my mother, my mother and me: a lineage of mothers and daughters losing each other and finding each other over and over again. [...] My heritage, what they have all passed on to me, is the loss, the search, the story.¹⁰⁷

By writing their stories, Ragusa ensures their survival and forces us to question the silence that surrounds the women's lives. As she asks: 'And what of Sybela's mother? She remains unnamed, invisible. Where along the way in the transmission of the story did she drop out?'¹⁰⁸ In addition to their potential to uncover a matrilineal narrative as a means for feminine empowerment, Sybela's and Persephone's stories reveal to the author 'the intricate crossings of blood, class, and culture that made us what we are: hybrids, shapeshifters, trespassers'.¹⁰⁹ The Ovidian version of Persephone is placed by Ragusa at the end of the book. While staring at African and Sicilian children playing soccer, and the Bengali girls speaking Sicilian dialect, Ragusa retells the goddess's experience in the underworld as a message of hope. Ragusa's version of Persephone

¹⁰⁶ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, pp. 71–2.

¹⁰⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 237.

¹⁰⁸ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 73.

shows how despite racial struggle and identity crisis one can emerge from sorrow victorious. This emergence, however, can only take place after a descent. To Ragusa, this moment is represented by her metaphorical journey through her memories. As she writes:

Descent [...] also carries a mythic meaning – Persephone’s descent into the underworld. This underworld is nothing like our modern vision of hell. It’s the realm of the ancestors, the realm of memory.¹¹⁰

In the author’s rewriting of Persephone, we can see the goddess has managed to overcome the oppression and the silence marking her narrative. This literary image recalls the message of Azara’s sculpture *The Goddess Wall*, in which the symbol of victory and empowerment is represented by the pomegranate held like a trophy on the threshold by Persephone’s hand. The in-between space occupied by the author, then, reflecting the liminal position occupied by the goddess she compares herself to, turns into a place of liberation from which the author can claim her difference and finally feel comfortable in her own skin.

¹¹⁰ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, pp. 237–38.



Figure 9 - The Goddess Wall, Nancy Azara (1991)

6. Conclusion

In *The Skin between Us*, remembering is a highly politicized act that critiques assumptions about race, class, and gender. The memoir rereads and re-tells H/history (and American history) through the stories of those who are at the margins. The idea that History reveals itself through peripheral voices underpins Ragusa's artistic and literary production. This is further confirmed by the author, in her interview with Clara Antonucci:

Storie ed esperienza collettiva sono tutte interconnesse. A me interessa la distinzione tra la storia ufficiale – che è spesso scritta dai dominatori, dai conquistatori – e la storia non ufficiale, quella marginale, quella che passa attraverso le storie che si raccontano in famiglia. Fatti che pur non documentati esistono in forma di storie. Per me anche questa è Storia e ha bisogno di una collocazione. Ho voluto indagare la Storia che emerge dai frammenti di memoria, tutto ciò che non può essere sottoposto al vaglio della prova.¹¹¹

(Stories and collective experience are interconnected. I am interested in the official history – which is often written by dominators, conquerors – and the unofficial history, the marginal one, the one that is filtered through the stories recounted in the family. Facts that although not being recorded do exist in the form of stories. To me this too is History and needs a collocation. I wanted to investigate the History emerging from the fragments of memory, all that cannot be exposed to a careful inspection.)

In her book, Ragusa is reclaiming a position within her two communities of belonging through memories, both individual and collective. Thus, she proves that memory is not the cradle of the past, but rather a solid base upon which it is possible to build one's future. Ragusa's memoir is a choral story in which the author does not confine herself to telling her own personal story; rather, by including collective and individual memory, she is creating a larger experience that reaches out to those who have been excluded from the process of history making. In *The Skin between Us*, memory surpasses nostalgia through the strategies of contesting, disordering, and connecting, developed through the mode of re-telling that activates the interplay of myth and memory. In so doing, memory becomes a positive experience that is future-oriented and one that redefines the borders of the 'master narratives' that set the rules for the definition of

¹¹¹ Ragusa, 'Fare Memoria', p. 47.

who is American and who is not. In this sense, we can understand that to recover a historical and collective memory is of utmost importance for an in-between subject like Ragusa, divided between dark and light, and always trying to negotiate her hybridity with ‘an almost acrobatic capacity’¹¹² of a funambulist on the rope.

In the memoir, then, the recovery of the myth of Persephone is central to the development of the story, and at once enables Ragusa to keep together and re-tell her own personal story. The myth of Persephone was told to Ragusa by Miriam as a gift. Miriam herself had a complex heritage that blended together her African origins with her European and Asian ones. In sharing the story of the myth with her niece, the woman was preparing the ground for Ragusa to experience a journey of personal and cultural discovery, something stable to turn to in dark times of dismay and through which to rediscover her Self. Gayle Greene argues that, when memory is employed in fictional works, the quest for the protagonist’s past starts with a journey home.¹¹³ *In The Skin between Us*, despite the fact that Ragusa is actually embarking on a journey to her ancestor’s mainland, the real journey is that of memory: ‘Women’s quests tend to be vertical rather than horizontal: women dive, surface, fly.’¹¹⁴ Similarly to Persephone, Ragusa moves vertically, diving into the past represented by the realm of memory, only to resurface empowered by the darkness she experienced and to finally claim her new, whole self.

In this chapter, we have seen that Ragusa, differently to Caperna Lloyd, became acquainted with the myth during her childhood. Ragusa’s work, then, is composed of both travel and family memoir characteristics. The myth, which in Caperna Lloyd’s text

¹¹² Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 223.

¹¹³ See Greene.

¹¹⁴ Carol P. Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (Boston: Beacon, 1980), as quoted in Greene, p. 303.

becomes a means of appropriation of ethnic roots through the physical quest for the fertility goddesses, in Ragusa's work is a means of self-representation. Shifting the focus from the Homeric patriarchal version of Persephone to the Ovidian one, in which Persephone fights against victimhood, Ragusa defines her process of negotiating hybridity. In the following chapter, we will move to Clapps Herman's family memoir, in which the quest for selfhood through the myth is represented as an inward journey. If both Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa have turned to the myth in a conscious and permeating way, Clapps Herman's use of it is recognizable both in the conscious way the author calls upon the image of Persephone to refer to her Italian American upbringing, as well as in patterns of mythical allusion that allow Clapps Herman to identify and resurrect the myth as an important narrative, underpinning the way in which she managed to articulate her Italian American identity through writing.

Chapter 4

The Ongoing Mythical Present in *The Anarchist Bastard* by Joanna Clapps

Herman

The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America (2011) is a family memoir by Joanna Clapps Herman. Clapps Herman draws from *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as the myth of Demeter and Persephone, to explore and come to a new understanding of her Italian American upbringing.¹ Connecting individual and collective memory, the memoir participates in the ongoing cultural conversation about the ‘historical amnesia about the material conditions of assimilation of Italian Americans in the United States’ and the ongoing process of recovery.²

The book is divided into four sections. The first, ‘Homer in Waterbury: The Backdrop’ describes the author’s Italian community of origins in Waterbury, Connecticut; the second, ‘The Unsayable: The Clapps’, traces the story of the author’s paternal family; the third, ‘Before and After Tinfoil: The Becce Family’, focuses on the story of the author’s maternal family; and the fourth and last section, ‘*E’ Poi? And Then?*’, portrays the author’s struggles to balance her Italian upbringing in Waterbury and her American adult life in Manhattan.

This chapter examines the author’s use of mythic narratives to expose the wounds caused by the often painful and unexpressed consequences of having to negotiate one’s hybrid cultural identity. I argue that these mythic narratives helped the author to grapple with her Italian American hybrid identity and to develop and empower

¹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*.

² Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 17.

her own authorial self. Clapps Herman draws on this literature to articulate the fears and the anxiety inherent to her in-betweenness. As she explains, ‘I [...] began to write and become’.³ As this quote seems to suggest, for Clapps Herman, writing is an essential component of her identity. Differently to Caperna Lloyd, who expresses herself also through filmmaking and photography, and Ragusa, who began her career as a documentary filmmaker and essayist, Clapps Herman has always turned to writing to articulate her process of identity quest.

In this chapter, I first investigate the historical conditions of the Italian migration – as they emerge from Clapps Herman’s memoir – paying special attention to the author’s upbringing in the Italian community of Waterbury. Secondly, I examine the values of *nostos*, *xenia*, and *nekyia*. These are fundamental in the Homeric epics, as well as in the myth of Persephone. Clapps Herman understands *nostos*, *xenia*, and *nekyia* as key values to interpret her family history. Thus, the Homeric tradition offers a tool for Clapps Herman to read the moral values of her Italian family and to write about her own sense of loss and cultural and personal fragmentation. Finally, I argue that the Homeric epics and the myth of Persephone allow Clapps Herman to overcome the silence surrounding her experience of uneasiness in relation to her Italian American identity. These ancestral narratives enable Clapps Herman to speak, through her memoir, for herself and the Italian American community at once.

³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 162.

1. *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America*

The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America explores Clapps Herman's quest for selfhood by retrieving memories from her family past. In a blend of pain and humour, past and present, myth and history, the narrator assembles the stories of her Italian American family since their migration from Avigliano and Tolve – two small villages in the southern Italian region of Basilicata – at the beginning of the twentieth century to Waterbury, Connecticut, where some of the family still lives today. Set in Waterbury and New York City, the memoir follows the story of the Clapps – the paternal family of the author – and the Becces – the maternal family of the author. Of particular interest from the Clapps family line is the character of the grandmother, Beatrice Coviello, nicknamed Bessie. The author never met her grandmother, who suffered from mental breakdowns and was institutionalized. Because of the secrets and the mystery surrounding the grandmother, Clapps Herman is fascinated by this mythic *figura*. The author also draws on Bessie's story to explore the life of the women of her family, as well as to understand where she stands in relation to them.

Vito Bece, the grandfather, and the anarchist bastard in the title, is a controversial character, as we are now going to see. Clapps Herman alternates an empathetic view of Vito with a critical one, depending on whether she is describing the patriarchal ruler of the family or the loving grandfather.⁴

Waterbury represents the matrix of the *Italianness* encoded in the author's life. The Italian values, customs, and traditions Clapps Herman inherited were passed down to her by the women of her family: her grandmother, her mother, her aunts, and her

⁴ The story of Vito Bece and his family is also collected in Anthony V. Riccio, *Farms, Factories, and Families: Italian American Women of Connecticut* (New York: State University of New York, 2014).

older sister. In 1963 Clapps Herman moved to Manhattan and spent her adult life in New York, thus becoming in touch with American values and culture.⁵ The separation from her Italian *tribe*, as the author describes it, marked a point of division in the author's life. From that moment on, she experienced a feeling of unbearable in-betweenness. She writes:

For many years I had lived with a divided consciousness without realizing it. My 'Italian' world was in Waterbury, Connecticut, with my family, where I grew up and where my large clan still sprawls. My adult life, husband, son, work life, intellectual and cultural life has been made in Manhattan where I moved when I was twenty-one. It wasn't something I thought much about. I simply lived this divided life. I went home to Waterbury and I came home to New York. Neither place knew much about the other.⁶

The author's initiation into the American world is the engine that triggers her crisis about her sense of belonging. Despite the general groundlessness that permeates her life, eventually Clapps Herman realizes that her identity is enriched by the possibility of inhabiting both the Italian world of her immigrant origins and the American world into which she was born. She will make her Italian American hybridity the privileged site of her literary creativity. *The Anarchist Bastard* is the means by which Clapps Herman establishes a dialogue between these different spaces. The author comes to understand why the journey from Waterbury to New York is the longest distance she has ever travelled – and not only from a geographical perspective. The journey, which had, at

⁵ On the author's official website www.joannaclappsherman.com it is possible to access pictures of Waterbury as well as a great variety of testimonials of the author's family life at the Waterbury farm. The website puts together historical material about immigration through the inclusion of films, oral history (documented in original dialect and accompanied by an English transcription), audio files, official documents, maps, family recipes, commentary about daily life, letters exchange, newspaper articles, and much more about the author's literary production.

⁶ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 1.

first, left her ‘languageless’,⁷ eventually gives her the words to speak and to write about herself. Through the writing of her memoir, Clapps Herman revisits the places she inhabited and rewrites her own Italian and American identities. What enables a rich kind of intimacy with one’s past? With regard to Italian American literature, this is not an uncommon question. For instance, Helen Barolini writes about her search for roots and identity: ‘I had to make the long journey to Italy, to see where and what I came from, to gain an ultimate understanding and acceptance of being American with shades of *italianità*.’⁸ Similarly, Ragusa, while travelling to Messina, writes: ‘What home was I searching for that chilly May morning on my way to Sicily? [...] I had to come this far to know that I needed to find my way back.’⁹ Thus, for Italian American women, Italy seems to represent the place of metaphorical, and sometimes physical, departure to rework their ethnic roots. For Clapps Herman, to know and to understand Italy is crucial to enter the unfolding development of her Italian American identity. To look back at Waterbury at a mature age enables her to process her clashing feelings towards her ethnicity. At the same time, the author speaks for her family and places it into history by means of making its story visible. In so doing, Clapps Herman defines her own place in history as well.

The stress on the historical dimension of Italian migrants is to be understood in relation to the predicament of later generations of Italian Americans and their struggle to fit into American society. Frank M. Sorrentino writes:

The second and the third generations of Italian Americans faced even more difficult challenges than their immigrant forebears. They could not maintain

⁷ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

⁸ Helen Barolini, ‘Becoming a Literary Person Out of Context’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 27.2 (1986), 262–74 (p. 269).

⁹ Kym Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*.

isolation from American culture. They had to cope with American institutions including the schools, the military, business and other powerful and pervasive cultural forces and entities. This created personality conflicts as well as partial estrangement both from their parents and with the larger American society. They had not only to adjust to two worlds and their distinct value systems but also to make compromises between their irreconcilable demands.¹⁰

It can be argued that personality conflicts and the anxiety of (not) belonging related to the Italian American identity are connected to the fact that the history of Italian Americans has undergone a process of ‘historical amnesia’.¹¹ The history of Italian Americans is one characterized by stereotypes, for instance the association with the *Mafia* and the image of mobsters. The process of identity definition, this being individual or collective, is informed by institutions; and, as Madan Sarup argues, ‘there is no doubt that identity-construction is increasingly dependent on images.’¹² The ever-present identification of Italians with organized crime and with a world of violence and corruption offered by media representation evidences what scholars define as ‘historical amnesia’ in the Italian American community. As Giunta and McCormick write, ‘this representation appealed both to non-Italian Americans, who could plug it into the larger tradition of the American gangster, and to many Italian Americans, who recognized on some level that, if one had to be labelled a criminal, it was better to be romanticized than persecuted.’¹³ This historical blur, which does not do justice to the lives of Italian immigrants in America, has made it difficult for later generations of Italian Americans to understand why their parents and their ancestors were so attached to their motherland.

¹⁰ Sorrentino and Krase, p. 4.

¹¹ Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 17.

¹² Madan Sarup, *Identity, Culture, and the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. xv.

¹³ Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 22.

It was difficult for these generations to develop a strong bond with Italy and its cultural values.

The Anarchist Bastard is the result of years of reflection about the author's own feelings of growing up Italian in America and of growing up American in Waterbury, where her family had recreated an Italian environment similar to the one left behind in Basilicata. In her memoir, Clapps Herman writes about the conflicts originating from her in-between position as exemplified by Sorrentino's words. At once, the book is positioned in the void created by what has been defined as 'historical amnesia' to narrow the gap between what has been told about Italian Americans and what has been left out about their history.

An explanation of Clapps Herman's childhood in Waterbury and her Italian heritage enables us to explore the interplay between Italian and American values in the shaping of the author's literary creativity. Clapps Herman forges a path of self-discovery through her appreciation of Homer and his epic tradition, as well as through her attachment to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the way the Homeric tradition and the myth of Persephone nestle in the process of Clapps Herman's writing.

2. Waterbury: an Italian American upbringing

'I often say I was born in 1944 but raised in the 15th century because although I was born in Waterbury, Connecticut, in a New England factory town, in post-World War II, I grew up in a large southern Italian family where the rules were absolute and customs

antiquated.’¹⁴ This is the *incipit* of *The Anarchist Bastard*. The fifteenth-century rules and customs the author refers to date back to the rules and customs as carried out in the ancient Greek world and which, somehow, still persist in her family. What Clapps Herman wants to explore is the ‘Greek “new world” [...] inscribed in cultural mores and oral traditions’ that was handed down to her by her grandparents and parents as ‘everyday lived reality’.¹⁵

As mentioned before, the author’s grandparents were born in Tolve and Avigliano, in Basilicata – ‘a place that even other Italians barely know’.¹⁶ Even though these villages are very small, they boast a rich and valuable historical heritage evident in the Greek remnants and ruins that still fiercely stand and preciously enrich the Lucania landscape. In this area, which was a Magna Graecia’s colony at the beginning of the seventh century BCE, it is possible to find Doric temples, statues of Greek gods and goddesses, and ruins of old settlements where historical relics were found and are now kept and displayed in museums. The Greek heritage is part and parcel of the author’s Italian family traditions. When Clapps Herman’s grandparents left Italy to migrate to America in 1903, they carried this cultural baggage with them. No one in the family ever thought of questioning the patriarchal hierarchy rooted in the Greek codes of behaviour that, in the author’s words, seemed to privilege:

[...] prehistorical ideas of pride and honor, shame and hospitality, of singing and storytelling, the palpable reality of dreams, and a strict code of what it meant to be a man and a woman. What was emphasized was shame not anxiety, honor, not accomplishment, hospitality rather than individual ambition, song and storytelling, not writing.¹⁷

¹⁴ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 7.

¹⁵ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 8

¹⁶ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 7.

¹⁷ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 9.

Only after leaving Waterbury at the beginning of the sixties did Clapps Herman realize her childhood and adolescence were shaped according to values that were at odds with the American world. Spending her adulthood in Manhattan, the protagonist is compelled to find a way to reconcile the two different spheres of belonging she inhabits and in which she was feeling ill at ease. In the first pages of her memoir, Clapps Herman explains that the shift from the Southern Italian upbringing to American daily life had been hard to accomplish. In this passage, from one sphere of belonging to another, she was left ‘languageless’¹⁸ and caught in-between ‘two irreconcilable loci’.¹⁹ What initially left Clapps Herman mute is that, although living and working in New York, she still felt she deeply belonged to Waterbury and her family, ‘utterly of them’.²⁰ Feeling so caught up in her memories of Waterbury, Clapps Herman ‘didn’t know how to negotiate where I had come from to where I was’.²¹ Because the author cannot find a distance from that reality, she feels unable to write about it. As she explains: ‘You cannot write about that which is so much a part of your self that you can’t step back from it, consider it, think about it.’²² To begin to understand why it was painful and complicated to negotiate the distance between these irreconcilable loci, the author turns to the Greek poet Homer.

In the first chapter, *My Homer*, Clapps Herman refers to Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as guidebooks to interpret the customs and values of her own Southern Italian family. She writes: ‘In Homer I found a means of understanding why the eighty-nine-mile journey from New York to Waterbury actually represented a span of millennia. Homer’s archaic terrain is as familiar to me as the Formica table in my

¹⁸ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

¹⁹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 8.

²⁰ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

²¹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

²² Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

mother's kitchen.'²³ Homer's epic and mythic narratives provided Clapps Herman with powerful stories that opened up a new perspective, and shed light on the origins of her family lore. It can be argued that, on the one hand, the author's appreciation for the Homeric epics originates from the fact that, after reading them, Clapps Herman was able to better understand and give sense to her family's historical roots and customs. On the other hand, Clapps Herman's engagement with Homer can also be interpreted as a declaration of intent by the author who wants to challenge the condition of 'historical amnesia' about Italian migrants in America, as I am now going to illustrate.

The Great Migration to America started at the end of the nineteenth century. Most Italians migrated to the US in the first decade of the twentieth century and until the 1930s a significant part of the Italian population was poor, illiterate, and of peasant origins. In *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, De Mauro argues that the phenomenon of migration in that period affected mainly the rural areas. Moreover, if the national rate of illiteracy decreased to an overall percentage of 21.6 %, among the rural areas, the rate amounted to 53.3 %.²⁴ The hardship faced by Italian migrants in America in those years was aggravated by the increasing influence of Social Darwinism, which promoted the 'Teutonic' race as the superior one.²⁵ For these reasons, Italians encountered great racism and were stigmatized by the main Anglo-Saxon society. Evidence of this is, for instance, Dr Arthur Sweeny's article 'Mental Tests for Immigrants' (1922), in which he writes:

²³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, pp. 8–9.

²⁴ Tullio De Mauro, *Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita*, pp. 58–59.

²⁵ *WOP! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination in the United States*, ed. by Salvatore J. LaGumina (San Francisco: Straight Arrows Books, 1973), p. 15. See also, Thomas A. Guglielmo, "'No Color Barrier': Italians, Race, and Power in the United States", in *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, ed. by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno (New York: Routledge, 2003), pp. 29–43.

We do not need the ignorant, the mentally feeble, the moron. [...] We have no place in this country for the “man with the hoe”, stained with the earth he digs, and guided by a mind scarcely superior to the ox, whose brother he is.²⁶

According to the classification of the United States Bureau of Immigrations at the end of the nineteenth century, then, northern and southern Italians were regarded as ‘distinctive races’.²⁷ For instance, in the *New York Times* (1891) Sicilians were often described in racially negative terms:

These sneaking and cowardly Sicilians who have transplanted to this country their lawless passions, the cutthroat practices, and the oath-bound societies of their native country, are to us a pest without mitigation. Our own rattlesnakes are as good citizens as they are.²⁸

The predicament of Italian migrants did not improve. Instead, they underwent further racism and discrimination during World War II. Because of the association with Mussolini, Italian Americans were looked upon with suspicion in America, and so was their language. This is testified to by the fact that ‘the records of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), for example, reveal that the use of the Italian language was a marker of potential disloyalty during the World War II era’.²⁹ The fear of being regarded as the foe of the country led Italian Americans to feel ashamed of their own language. Such shame, in turn, caused the repression of the Italian language with repercussions for Italian American children who could barely speak any Italian.³⁰ Later

²⁶ Arthur Sweeney, ‘Mental Tests for Immigrants’, *The North American Review*, 215.70 (1922). 600–12 (p. 611).

²⁷ Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 8.

²⁸ Quoted in Giunta and Zamboni McCormick, p. 9.

²⁹ Nancy Carnevale, *A New Language, a New World: Italians in the U.S.* (Urban: University of Illinois Press, 2009), p. 159.

³⁰ See Nancy Carnevale.

generations had to face further hostility and hatred fuelled by stereotypes: Italian Americans represented the outcasts of American society. We can understand that for Clapps Herman, connecting her ancestors and the Homeric epics becomes a form of redemption for Italian Americans – especially for those coming from the south of Italy – whose roots stem to a mythic time, which lives and relives in masterpieces of literary and historical value and importance.³¹ These values, specifically *nostos*, *xenia*, and *nekyia*, will be discussed in the following sections.

3. *Nostos*: forms of homecoming

The term *nostos* refers to the desire for home and the idea of return. This term derives from the Greek *νόστος* – return home – and is one of the main *topoi* of *The Odyssey* which focuses on Odysseus' nostalgia and longing to return home to Ithaca and to his wife, Penelope. Although the idea of travel is exemplified by Odysseus' journey to return home, in Italian American narrative the *nostos* can be symbolic of the migrants' journey from their homeland to the New World, and their continuous and often unfulfilled desire to return to their motherland. As Marigo Alexopoulou has noted, however, the understanding of the term *nostos* has acquired new meanings in the modern world.³² Such a term can be read in relation to issues of identity, as well as in relation to the (im)possibility of return. What does it mean for Italian Americans of second or even third generation *to return*? Can they return to a land they never

³¹ Italian American author Domenica Ruta also refers to Homer and Greek gods as a term of comparison to identify and historicize her roots and family past. As Ruta writes: 'I read about the gods and goddesses of Greek antiquity, who were as real to me as the people in my family'. Domenica Ruta, *With or Without You: A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2013), p. 72.

³² Marigo Alexopoulou, *The Theme of Returning Home in Ancient Greek Literature: The Nostos of the Epic Heroes* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen, 2009). p. 1.

possessed and, therefore, never abandoned in the first place? Where do they long to return to? Why is the idea of *nostos* so often present in their narratives? What are the implications of *nostos* in relation to the process of identity construction?

In *The Anarchist Bastard*, *nostos* is a condition characterising Clapps Herman's family members. As the author declares:

They talked about it all the time. All the time on a daily basis: 'You don't know what the air was like there. The water was so pure. The vegetables were better...' you know, they longed with such great *nostos*, with such great nostalgia, so great longing, just like Odysseus. They longed and never allowed themselves to go back.³³

But how is *nostos* presented in the author's family? As Clapps Herman writes in her memoir, besides the Homeric values, there are two other major practices employed by the poet and also performed in her family on a daily basis: singing songs and storytelling. The author's father, who grew up with the tradition of storytelling, was himself a prolific storyteller. As Clapps Herman tells us:

He considered his point of view, his audience, weighed language and figures of speech, in short, he composed them. Each time a story was told, it had the classical dimensions of oral tradition, certain repeated phrasings, a repetition of image, theme and form and, no matter how many times he repeated the story, with almost no variation.³⁴

The precision and the accuracy of his performance are so outstanding that the author believes it would have impressed even scholars of epic literature such as Milman Parry

³³ This piece of information was given to me during an interview I carried out with Joanna Clapps Herman in her apartment in New York in June 2013. Further references to this interview will be indicated as 'Interview with Clapps Herman', (21 June, 2013). See appendix p. 294.

³⁴ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 39.

and Albert Lord.³⁵ Moreover, the fact that the stories were subject to no change established a pact between the teller (the father) and the listener (the daughter), who believed those stories were recounts of truth. The importance of these stories is that they are embedded in the values transmitted to Clapps Herman. Therefore, the stories served to explain the difference between good and bad, right and wrong behaviour, honesty and corruption. In short, these stories identified the code of behaviour that a woman was supposed to abide by in order to be acknowledged as virtuous. By carefully listening to these stories, Clapps Herman understood early in her childhood that society had expectations for a woman according to which she was supposed to be a good cook, faithful to her husband and family, and skilled in the art of sewing.³⁶ But above all, these stories, Clapps Herman writes, were stories and recollections of ‘the other side’,³⁷ describing the author’s ancestors’ experience of personal and collective *nostos*.

If the journey from Italy to America of Clapps Herman’s ancestors’ is an outward one, the author’s own journey is all internal. While her family experienced departure and the detachment from their homeland, the author embarks on an emotional and personal journey to explore her complex heritage and hybrid identity; in other words, a journey of identity discovery. As Madan Sarup argues, through a journey ‘identity is changed [...] our subjectivity is recomposed. [...] Exile can be deadening, but it can also be very creative [...] it can be a resource. [...] identity is to do not with being but with becoming’.³⁸ Journey, thus, takes shape as a twofold experience: it is a moment of strife and grief; however, through this painful reality, one can achieve an

³⁵ See Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 10.

³⁶ In Homer’s times, women were judged by their dexterity in handling thread and needle and being fine seamstresses. For a further study about the art of sewing in Italian American writings see Giunta and Sciorra.

³⁷ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 9.

³⁸ Sarup, p. 6.

inward change propelling creative ways to rethink and refabricate identity. Although Italian migrants might never physically return, they can go back to their land of origin through their stories. Thus, *nostos* is a form of a journey for the author's family. But what is *nostos* to Clapps Herman? The *nostos* as experienced by the author's family is the means that allows Clapps Herman to identify herself as Italian. *Nostos*, in fact, works as a door through which she can enter a different home, a different place of origin situated in a mythical time and space; through the experience of *nostos*, Italy is symbolic of an ancestral loss which, to be recovered, has to undergo a process of revision and reimagining enacted by the author.

Discussing home and journey in Italian American literature, Clara Ranghetti harks back to T.S. Eliot's verse, 'home is where one starts from', to investigate the relationship between place and identity. Ranghetti suggests that Italian American women artists could be compared to wandering explorers who, metaphorically and incessantly, move through the geographies and the languages they seek to possess in order to grapple with the fragmentation caused by psychological displacement.³⁹ Ranghetti's argument can also be applied to Clapps Herman and her personal experience as an Italian American woman, whose journey and quest for roots is portrayed in her memoir as a negotiation between Italy and America, represented by Waterbury and Manhattan. For Clapps Herman, home and family are the locus of the Italian tradition and the art of storytelling in which she can (re)discover the story of her ancestors. *The Anarchist Bastard* tells us that when the author was a child, she belonged to Waterbury and therefore she grew up and identified herself as Italian. During her adolescence, however, the author feels the need to get away from home. As she writes:

³⁹ Clara Ranghetti, "Home is Where One Starts From": Journeys of Self-Discovery in Italian American Writings by Women', *L'Analisi Linguistica e Letteraria*, 14 (2006), 5-37.

‘I escaped my family in a rage, needing to loosen their claustrophobic bonds.’⁴⁰ As Barolini has noted, to break away from the family is a common experience for Italian Americans who seek selfhood. As she writes: ‘Italian American writing is full of the dilemma of the individual on the road to selfhood who is caught in the anguish of what seems betrayal to family. Yet breaking out of the family, or the neighbourhood, is a step in the search for one’s autonomy.’ For Clapps Herman it is exactly the separation from her family that initiates the author’s journey into her self.⁴¹ When Clapps Herman moves to New York, she starts seeing herself as an American. These trips lead Clapps Herman to realize that:

All that I knew about family, being a wife and mother, came from Waterbury and what I had learned as a young New York woman simply didn’t hold against the original forces of motherhood and family. [...] I had no idea how to reconcile work and family, religious differences and cultural values. Family and the self.⁴²

In order to overcome this phase of displacement exemplified in the passage above, the author first looks back at her childhood in Waterbury and then to her adult life in New York. In trying to create a link between these two worlds, Clapps Herman turns to the myth of Persephone as key to the understanding of her Italian American identity rooted in her ancestors’ southern Italian heritage. The search for roots, thus, intersects with the recovery of the myth that in the memoir appears to the author as an epiphany. Clapps Herman writes that one day, while walking through the streets of New York with her boyfriend at the time, she told him that that day she read the story of the myth of Persephone to a group of fourth graders. At the end of the story the children

⁴⁰ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 141.

⁴¹ Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 12.

⁴² Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

were mesmerized by it, although one of them, Adam, said: ‘How I wish I could believe in something like that!’⁴³ In relation to this episode, Clapps Herman says:

I felt like a thrill go through me and great joy that I had had the privilege to truly believe in a living myth like that. And I had had the privilege of partaking that in the way that these lovely, relatively upper class kids, could never have had.⁴⁴

Here the author refers to the myth as something she *lived*, something she *experienced*. The Clapps, in fact, lived on farmland in Waterbury and this is strictly linked to the myth of Persephone in its etiological function that helps to explain the agricultural cycle and the alternating of the seasons. At once, because the myth can be linked to the peasant and working-class condition of the author’s family, Clapps Herman realizes how important the story told by the myth was for her and why it was crucial for her to believe the myth was real. It was a precious snippet of her family’s past, thus her own story too. Conversely, the children she was reading the story to grew up in a socio-economic environment opposite to hers; they belonged to the upper-class, as Clapps Herman stressed. Therefore, they did not instinctively respond to the myth as the author did.

In *Writing with an Accent*, Giunta argues that several Italian American authors have described the dehumanizing condition of the Italian American working class. In Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* (1939), for instance, workers are downgraded to beasts: ‘The men were transformed into single, silent beasts.’⁴⁵ As Gardaphé has pointed out, in Di Donato’s book, the author redeems the condition of labourers by means of elevating ‘the common worker to the status of a deity [...] as a way of

⁴³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Interview with Clapps Herman (21 June, 2013). See appendix, p. 277.

⁴⁵ Pietro Di Donato, *Christ in Concrete* (New York: Penguin, 1937), p. 9.

dignifying the plight of the worker'.⁴⁶ In a similar fashion, Clapps Herman, when describing her father's death due to lung cancer – developed because of the father's exposure to fumes and chemicals throughout his life as a steel worker – compares him to 'an ancient Greek column, a man who could support weight, burdens. He was a man you could lean into'.⁴⁷ As this quotation highlights, the Greek world is a consistent source underpinning the author's literary creativity. Clapps Herman draws on her mythic Greek roots to break her condition of 'languagelessness' and to articulate the notion of journey and *nostos* in relation to her family and her own experience. Because the history of Italian Americans is studded with false myths, stereotypes and generalizations, the act of overcoming 'languagelessness' through the writing of the memoir is a political act. It becomes an important testimony of the migratory experience of Italians in America and, at once, takes shape as a means of defence against the threat of not being entitled to agency, to one's voice. *The Anarchist Bastard* represents the author's personal journey made possible by looking at her family's stories of *nostos*.

4. *Xenia*: rules of hospitality

The idea of *nostos* is strictly linked to that of *xenia*, "hospitality". The concept of hospitality as a matter for academic discussion has gained importance only recently.⁴⁸

According to Bob Brotherton hospitality is 'a contemporaneous human exchange, which

⁴⁶ Fred L. Gardaphé, 'Continuity in Concrete: (Re)Constructing Italian American Writers', in *Industry, Technology, Labor and the Italian American Communities* ed. by Jerome Krase, Louise Napolitano Carman, and Janet E. Worrall (Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1997), pp. 245–54 (p. 5). See also Giunta, *Writing with an Accent*, p. 57.

⁴⁷ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 100.

⁴⁸ A remarkable contribution to the study of hospitality comes from *In Search of Hospitality: Theoretical Perspectives and Debates*, ed. by Conrad Lashley and Alison J. Morrison (Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2000). See also Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

is voluntarily entered into, and designed to enhance the mutual well-being of the parties concerned through the provision of accommodation, and/or food and/or drink'.⁴⁹ Alison Morrison and O’Gorman further identify hospitality as the praxis that:

[...] represents a host’s cordial reception, welcome and entertainment of guests or strangers of diverse social backgrounds and cultures charitably, socially or commercially with kind and generous liberality, into one’s space to dine and/or lodge temporarily. Dependent on circumstance and context the degree to which the hospitality offering conditional or unconditional may vary.⁵⁰

Hospitality, thus, is presented as a multifarious concept that lends itself to study from different perspectives.⁵¹ In relation to Clapps Herman’s memoir, it is interesting to investigate what O’Gorman has defined as the ‘honourable tradition’ of *xenia*. O’Gorman, in fact, states that the ‘honourable tradition’ is made up of common features, for instance:

- The concepts of guests, stranger, and host are closely related;
- Hospitality is seen as essentially organic, revealing much about the cultural values and beliefs of the societies;
- Reciprocity of hospitality is an established principle;
- Providing hospitality is paying homage to the gods – a worthy and honourable thing to do – and failure is condemned in both the human and spiritual worlds.⁵²

⁴⁹ Bob Brotherton, ‘Hospitality Management Research: Towards the Future?’, in *The Handbook of Contemporary Hospitality Management Research*, ed. by Bob Brotherton (Chichester: John Wiley, 2000), pp. 531–43 (p. 532).

⁵⁰ Alison Morrison and Kevin D. O’Gorman, ‘Hospitality Studies and Hospitality Management: a Symbiotic Relationship’, *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 27.2, 214–21 (p. 218).

⁵¹ For a further study see *Hospitality: A Social Lens*, ed. by Conrad Lashley, Paul Lynch, and Alison J. Morrison (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007).

⁵² Kevin D. O’Gorman, ‘Dimensions of Hospitality: Exploring Ancient and Classical Origins’, in *Hospitality: A Social Lens*, ed. by Conrad Lashley, Paul Lynch, and Alison J Morrison (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007), pp. 17–32 (p. 28).

These are poignant features in the narrative of *The Anarchist Bastard* in which Clapps Herman turns to Homer's epics to create a parallel between her family's code of behaviour and the rules of the Greek world. Hospitality, in fact, was of great value in Homer's times for the reasons underlined by O'Gorman. *Xenia* was also a rule that no one was meant to break in Clapps Herman's family in Waterbury. As Clapps Herman writes: 'Because after the fall of Troy Odysseus travels for ten years to return home, always in a perpetual state of *nostos*, one of the great concerns of this epic is *xenia* or hospitality. [...] in the Odyssey good *xenia* is good character.'⁵³ Similarly, for her family, the author writes: 'hospitality marked the essence of seeing ourselves as a civilized people. [...] you could say *xenia* marked for us the essence of our morality.'⁵⁴ For instance, Clapps Herman's grandmother rarely left the house if no one else was in. It would have been shameful to leave the house unattended in case someone happened to knock at the door in search of hospitality, as respecting hospitality is a way to honour the gods. As the author states in the interview, 'home was everything',⁵⁵ and this means a great deal when read in relation to the Homeric tradition in which 'hospitality was centred around the *oikos* (home-household)'.⁵⁶ In *The Anarchist Bastard*, the *oikos* is represented as the kingdom of women who preserved and carried out the value of *xenia*. As Clapps Herman confirms: 'There was no question. There was an absolute distinction. Domestic life belonged to us, the women and the girls. And outside of the house ... that was for husbands and the boys.' And then the author adds: 'But we did not see that as a diminution of ourselves, we were proud of our female roles.'⁵⁷ This pride emerges especially when the author describes an anecdote collected in *The Anarchist Bastard*

⁵³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 13.

⁵⁴ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Interview with Clapps Herman (21 June, 2013). See appendix, p. 292.

⁵⁶ O'Gorman, p. 22.

⁵⁷ Interview with Clapps Herman, (21 June 2013). See appendix, p. 292.

and which is useful to explain the code of *xenia*. The episode is an example of how the ‘honourable tradition’ of *xenia* spoken of by O’Gorman is observed by the author’s family. One day a Russian man was wandering near the Clapps’ farm. Although the man was humbly asking for some food, when Clapps Herman’s grandmother noticed his legs and feet were covered in pus, she urged him to take his shoes and socks off and then bathed his legs with disinfectant. She washed his legs and feet, spread ointment on them and wrapped them up in bandages. She took pity on the poor man, and as soon as her husband came home, she asked him to employ the Russian at their pig farm. This story parallels two episodes from *The Odyssey*. In one Nausicaa is welcoming Odysseus; the man is bathed, offered food, drink and a place to spend the night. In the other episode, Odysseus is returning home to Ithaca disguised as a beggar. Penelope, who does not recognize her husband, welcomes the stranger and orders that he be given a proper bath and a clean bed to rest. Eurycleas, who used to be Odysseus’ nurse, recognizes her master’s identity while washing the beggar’s legs.⁵⁸

Further evidence of the code of *xenia* characterising the Greek tradition and of interest to Clapps Herman can be found in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. When Persephone is abducted her mother, Demeter, wanders the earth in search of her daughter. Eventually, she is welcomed into the house of the king Keleo and his wife, queen Metaneira, at the Greek city of Eleusis. Here the goddess lives as the nurse of Demophon, the king and queen’s only male son. To repay the *xenia* received (thus respecting the honourable tradition of *xenia*), Demeter decides to make a god out of Demophon and every night, behind Metaneira’s back, she immerses the child in flames, until the queen finds out by spying on her. Demeter’s wrath at the insolence of the

⁵⁸ Homer, *The Odyssey*, book XIX, verses 499–601.

queen is implacable and the city of Eleusis is ordered to build a temple in honour of the goddess to be blessed with forgiveness.

Although these episodes highlight the value of *xenia* in ancient times and why it was so important for the author's family to respect it, what does *xenia* entail for the author and her writing process? If, on the one hand, it is an important value that informed her Italian American upbringing in Waterbury, on the other hand, *xenia* relates to the condition of migrants of the author's family. As Clapps Herman asks in the memoir in relation to *xenia*: 'if you were a stranger in the land (an immigrant), away from your own people, would you be welcomed or harmed?'⁵⁹ We have seen already that the history of Italian Americans is characterized by feelings of xenophobia. The exclusion of Italian Americans by Anglo-American society becomes central in the narratives of Italian American writers. If we look at Italian American female writers we find that, as Barolini argues, these women struggled to assert their authority as literary figures because of the patriarchal culture into which they were born and raised. Moreover, they had to face hostility coming from the Anglo-American literary mainstream.⁶⁰ An example of this is described by Gilbert when she writes:

Growing up during World War II, I fantasized changing my name from Mortola to something more innocuous (Martell? Morton?), and when at twenty I married into a family whose Jewish surname (Gelbart) had been anglicized on Ellis Island to the WASP-ish Gilbert, I'm sorry to say I was curiously relieved. At that point (in the late fifties) I was no feminist, and as I was to write years later in a poem (*The Leeks*) partly on this subject, I wanted 'to be an American,/ [wanted] a name that ends in a Protestant consonant/ instead of a Catholic vowel'.

Of course, I must have intuited whole volumes of anti-Italian cultural snobbery, the kind that prompted one late-nineteenth-century writer to publish an article titled *What Shall We Do with the Dago?* in *Popular Science Monthly*. I wanted a name that *didn't*

⁵⁹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 13.

⁶⁰ See the introduction chapter in Barolini, *The Dream Book*, pp. 3–55.

reek of garlic and cigars, didn't ooze olive oil, had never drunk red wine! I wanted a name that wouldn't shake hands with Mussolini! I wanted – to be perfectly frank – a name that never met a Mafioso!⁶¹

This passage is further evidence of the injustice characterizing the process of assimilation of Italian migrants in America. The racist attitudes shown towards the first Italians who settled in America also had repercussions for later generations of Italian Americans, as Gilbert's statement 'I wanted "to be an American"' seems to suggest. Feelings of xenophobia, thus, delayed the production of an Italian American literature at large, as well as one produced by women in particular – as discussed in chapter one.

Raised to respect the honourable tradition of *xenia* even in a land where this value did not pass the frontier of Ellis Island, Clapps Herman claims agency by means of stressing the value of *xenia* inherent in the code of behaviour of her family. The author revisits the Greek tradition to challenge the notion of the Italian people as violent, ignorant, the '*dagoes*'. As Smith and Watson argue, in fact, the act of 'telling the story' empowers the subjects to 'exercise some control over the meaning of their "lives"'.⁶² Clapps Herman produces a book that fully shows the political strength of the genre of memoir as *The Anarchist Bastard* becomes a collective narrative that redeems the discrimination suffered by her family and by Italian Americans in general.

5. *Nekyia*: the world of the dead and the '*knowledge from beyond*'

Nekyia is the ability to call on ghosts and question them about the future. This is a meaningful value for Clapps Herman, as well as a source of her literary creativity. The

⁶¹ Sandra Mortola Gilbert, 'Mysteries of the Hyphen: Poetry, Pasta, and Identity Politics', in *Beyond the Godfather: Italian American Writer on the Real Italian American Experience*, ed. by A. Kenneth Ciongoli and Jay Parini (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1997), pp. 49–61 (p. 56).

⁶² Smith and Watson, *Women, Autobiography, Theory*, p. 14.

author engages with the value of *nekyia* in both *The Anarchist Bastard* and in her work *On Visiting Our Dead*.⁶³ Clapps Herman explains that the performing of *nekyia* in her family is comparable with the tradition of *nekyia* in Homeric literature. In the Homeric texts, auspices and augurs are used to predict the future through the flight of the birds or by analysing their entrails. The interpretations of dreams and the prediction of the future were, thus, key features of the Homeric stories. These are also a daily praxis carried out in Waterbury among the Clapps family. For instance, Clapps Herman describes the scene from *The Odyssey* in which Penelope meets Odysseus who had returned home disguised as a beggar after years of travelling. In this episode, Penelope tells the beggar of a dream she had in which an eagle kills her geese. The beggar replies, explaining to Penelope that the dream means Odysseus will free her from the suitors and no one will survive his revenge.⁶⁴

In Clapps Herman's family, the illiterate grandmother on her mother's side was the designated diviner. When the author and her sister used to wake up in the morning and were eager to tell their mother about a dream they might have had, they were stopped immediately and prompted by her to have food before telling the dream. In fact, if the dream was not a good one, only food had the power to prevent the omen from happening. After the dream was told, only their Italian grandmother had the knowledge and the wisdom to interpret it and predict the future – an art she had learned to master in Italy and kept practising in Waterbury. The Clapps strongly believed in a true connection between the world of the dead and that of the living. In *On Visiting Our*

⁶³ Joanna Clapps Herman, Lucia Mudd and Anna Mudd, 'On Visiting Our Dead', *Religions*, 4, 1-x manuscripts, 2013, 358–66. In this piece, Clapps Herman, together with her sister, Lucia Mudd, and Lucia's daughter, Anna Mudd, investigates the meaning of death and grief. In this piece, the author turns to her father's death and articulates the way she and Lucia experienced this painful loss. Mudd is responsible for the illustrations of the essay. These were recreated using family photographs and letters written by Peter Clapps (the author's father).

⁶⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey*, book XIX, verses 649–707.

Dead, the author's sister is able to decipher their dead father's presence in the signs around her. Similarly, in the memoir, their aging mother was certain that her dead husband was trying to establish a connection with her from beyond. She also used to keep a diary in which she took note of every time her husband had proven his presence to her from the world of the dead.

Further evidence of the importance of the mythic interpretation of dreams is provided by the author when she writes that once their grandmother had a dream about one of her daughters being abducted by a man. For days she was worried something bad was going to happen to one of her children, until after a few days one of her daughters admitted she was pregnant. Being pregnant without being married in the early 1960s was a scandal, a deep shame for both the woman and her whole family. Nonetheless, the grandmother was relieved by the news, which meant that no one wanted to abduct her daughter; rather, the daughter was going to be married soon. In this dream and its prediction, as Clapps Herman explains in her memoir, is embedded the ancient Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in which sex and marriage are interpreted as an abduction of the daughter by a man – a Hades figure. Several readings of this myth tend to interpret marriage as a metaphoric death for the woman who is compared to a Persephone-like figure when the young goddess is separated from her mother to become a wife and, potentially, a mother herself.⁶⁵ Through marriage, in fact, women begin their journey into womanhood next to their husbands. Twentieth-century Italian American

⁶⁵ Just to name a few: *Finding Persephone: Women's Ritual in the Ancient Mediterranean*, ed. by Maryline Parce and Angeliki Tzanetou (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Tamara Agha-Jaffar, *Demeter and Persephone: Lessons from a Myth* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2002). Helene P. Foley, 'A Question of Origins: Goddess Cult Greeks and Modern', *Women's Studies*, 23 (1994), 193–215; Rush Rehm, *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); Nicholas J. Richardson, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); Downing. It is also interesting to note that in French, the hen party celebrated for the bride-to-be is called *enterrement de vie de jeune fille* – the burial of the young girl.

women writers, however, have also turned to this powerful myth to describe the oppression of patriarchal society.⁶⁶ It is therefore possible to understand Persephone's experience in the Underworld as 'emblematic of the constraints of marriage'.⁶⁷ On the one hand, the world of *nekyia* appears in the memoir as further evidence of the fact that the author's family code of behaviour is rooted in an ancient and distant world that draws on the Homeric tradition and the myth of Persephone. On the other hand, the author links the world of *nekyia* to the kingdom of Hades where a woman of her family was initially thought to have been abducted. This kingdom, traditionally symbolic of Persephone's victimization, is perceived, however, as a site of liberation; the abduction takes shape 'not as violation, but as initiation'.⁶⁸ Clapps Herman's grandmother, in fact, is relieved to know her dream meant her daughter was going to be married. Her daughter would have, indeed, left the house, but would not have been lost forever. Similarly, in the myth of Persephone, although Demeter is shattered by her daughter's abduction, she is comforted by the negotiation that allowed her to reunite with Persephone for six months every year.

In *The Anarchist Bastard*, the value of *nekyia* as linked to Hades can help to shed light on the condition of Italian women during the years of migration and assimilation in America, as I will suggest through a possible reading of the experience of the abduction to a metaphoric underworld, as portrayed in the narrative of Clapps Herman's memoir. In the following section, I will examine the pattern of mythical allusion which lies at the core of the myth of Persephone and is inscribed in the mother-daughter bond.

⁶⁶ See for instance Walters; Downing.

⁶⁷ Parca and Tzanetou, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Malcolm Rivers, 'Puberty Rites', in *The Long Journey Home: Re-visioning the Myth of Demeter and Persephone For our Time*, ed. by Christine Downing (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), pp. 155–64 (p. 161).

6. Ascending and descending: Persephone's abduction

We have seen that when the author's grandmother had a dream about the abduction of one of her daughters, she interpreted it as a bad omen. As it turned out, however, the dream was a premonition of her daughter's shotgun wedding due to an unexpected pregnancy. The daughter would have left the hearth to start her new life as a wife and a mother herself. The pregnancy, then, is welcomed with great joy as this guarantees the continuation of family. Angeliki Tzanetou, however, argues that the connection between female and agricultural fertility anchors women to the inescapable female nature which is subject to the 'unchanging rhythms of nature, whose laws must be sustained to guarantee human survival and prosperity'.⁶⁹ In this sense, Tzanetou articulates the previously mentioned 'marriage constraints' experienced by women when they are expected to have children in order to assure the continuation of life and family. When family is the only noble ideal a woman has to pursue, then marriage could be lived as a burden, a cage in which all their ambitions and creativity are suppressed by men's desires and needs. When marriage is imposed on women to guarantee the continuation of the family line this can have dramatic consequences and opens up another interpretation of the abduction as presented in the narrative of Clapps Herman's memoir.

The author's grandmother, Bessie, was unhappily married to Giuseppe Clapps, a marriage that eventually led Bessie to a life of 'darkness'. Giuseppe and Bessie's first child, Francesco, died of pneumonia when he was eight months old. Bessie was still grieving after the loss of her beloved first son when she had her second child. She had

⁶⁹ Parca and Tzanetou, p. 4.

another three babies within the space of five years. After every birth Bessie suffered severe post-partum depression and was not able to take care either of herself or her own children. Thus, she entered a phase of darkness, and no one succeeded in bringing her back to light. Bessie was hospitalized and there she spent most of her life until she eventually passed away. Bessie Coviello becomes a mythical *figura* in the author's imagination. Clapps Herman never had a chance to meet her grandmother, except in her relatives' memories of her and their suppositions about what had made Bessie unable to cope with life. This story greatly impacted Clapps Herman. Because several stories about Bessie were told, there was not a single truth about her. Hence, the author puts together all that was told about her grandmother and then imagines and creates her own investigation of the case. She writes:

There are many versions of how and why my grandmother Beatrice descended into madness. One is that my grandfather was so mean to her, so violent and so crushingly cruel that one day she just snapped. Another is that her mother-in-law joined in the violence against her. Another is that her own mother was never right in the head. It just ran in the family.⁷⁰

The possible causes that triggered Bessie's illness show the effect of male violence upon women. In addition, Bessie's depression can help us to understand the implications inherent in the mother-daughter bond. Bessie's mother is invisible in the story of the memoir. Although never explicitly mentioned, we can either imagine that Bessie, like Carolina (Caperna Lloyd's grandmother), had to separate from her own mother to join her future husband in America, or she died when Bessie was a child. The role of Bessie's mother is taken over by Philomena Clapps, the mother-in-law who came all the way from Italy and moved in with Bessie and Giuseppe. Philomena's

⁷⁰ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 32.

ruling attitude towards her daughter-in-law ended up having devastating results for Bessie. The young woman, in fact, felt psychologically dominated by the imposing presence of Philomena and, consequently, started to develop forms of anxiety that gave rise to her depression.

Cavarero's interpretation of the myth of Persephone identifies the central theme of the myth as the power of the mother, which is inscribed in nature as the power 'to generate or not to generate'.⁷¹ Cavarero argues that the reciprocal visibility of mother and daughter is necessary for the maternal power to manifest itself.⁷² While Persephone is on earth, reciprocal visibility is possible and Demeter makes the whole land grow fertile. When Persephone is abducted to hell, the gaze between mother and daughter is jeopardized and eventually interrupted. Unable to protect her daughter, Demeter stops the land from producing any kind of nourishment. In this plot we can see that Persephone, the daughter, exists exclusively in relation to her mother and therefore while she is on earth, Persephone is symbolic of the eternal child. This is also evident and more explicit in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter in which Persephone is identified first and foremost as Demeter's daughter: 'Δήμητρ' ἠύκομον, σεμνήν θεόν, ἄρχομ' αἰδεῖν, αὐτῆ νῆ δὲ *θύγατρα* τανύσφυρον, ἣν Αἰδωνεύς ἤρπαξεν' (italics mine) (Demeter I begin to sing, the fair-tressed awesome goddess, herself and her slim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneous seized).⁷³

The mother-daughter bond as pivotal for a woman to develop her own sense of womanhood is also explained by Rich, who argues that:

The first knowledge any woman has of warmth, nourishment, tenderness, security, sensuality, mutuality, comes from her mother. That earliest enwrapment of one female

⁷¹ Cavarero, p. 59.

⁷² Cavarero, p. 62.

⁷³ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn*, lines 1–3, pp. 2–3.

body with another can sooner or later be denied or rejected, felt as choking possessiveness, as rejection, trap, or taboo; but it is, at the beginning, the world.⁷⁴

Since Bessie had no model to turn to in order to shape her motherly identity, she struggled to find a measure for her being in the world. Eventually she had no means of survival. The horizontal interruption of the gaze between Bessie and the mother contributed to the psychological vertical descent of the woman into the abyss. Moreover, Bessie was left to the care of her mother-in-law, who was a male identified woman.⁷⁵ ‘Women growing into a world hostile to us’, Rich says, ‘need a very profound kind of loving in order to learn to love ourselves’.⁷⁶ Both Giuseppe and Philomena are described as violent and authoritative characters who ruled the house at the expense of Bessie, who embodies an unfortunate Persephone figure inside the frame of *The Anarchist Bastard’s* story. Thus, deprived of that ‘profound kind of loving’, Bessie exists in the narrative of the memoir only as incapable of producing any nourishment. Furthermore, Bessie’s story is symbolic of the importance of the values of *nostos*, *xenia*, and *nekyia* discussed so far as the failing of these resulted in the failure to help Bessie. The impossibility of returning to Italy to reunite with her mother, the alien Waterbury environment Bessie lived in, and the hostility of her mother-in-law and husband led the woman to experience the world of *nekyia* translated as the mental illness she was trapped in. Clapps Herman’s rewriting of her grandmother’s story from the perspective

⁷⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 218.

⁷⁵ In regards to her great grandmother, Clapps Herman says: ‘I would say that my great grandmother, Mammanonna we called her, who was Philomena Clapps, I would say she was male identified, she was a male identified woman, and, by the way, she was the dominant figure in her marriage. So she was more of a male persona, very much like Mario Puzo describes his mother, in *Fortunate Pilgrim*.’ In the interview, the author explains that both Mario Puzo – author of *The Godfather* – and David Chase – creator of *The Sopranos* TV series – have moulded the ruling male characters of their works on their own mothers.

⁷⁶ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, p. 246.

of the oppressions she was subjected to entitles Bessie to a voice and a place in the family history.

Rich understands the process of writing as one of re-vision: ‘Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in our cultural history: it is an act of survival.’⁷⁷ By entering Bessie’s story through the lens of Homeric ancient values and Greek mythologies with ‘fresh eyes’, Clapps Herman is re-inventing possible narratives that challenge the memory that Bessie was to blame for her own illness: ‘My mother had a weak mind.’⁷⁸ Such reinvention makes it possible to think of other narratives for the other women of the author’s family. As the following section aims to highlight, the constraints deriving from the patriarchal mores that governed the author’s family also had repercussions on later generations.

⁷⁷ Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 35.

⁷⁸ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 32.



Figure 9 - Beatrice Coviello (Bessie) and Giuseppe Clapps on their wedding day.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Courtesy of Joanna Clapps Herman.

7. Persephone *Περσέφρων*: the voice of wisdom

Bessie was not the only one who psychologically suffered under the rules of patriarchy. For instance, in the memoir the author writes about her own mother's fear of her father and of his insistent reprimands of his daughters, who he thought would never become good wives:

Often, deep in our night's sleep my sister and I were shaken loose from our dreams by my mother's caffeinated screams, 'Peter, Peter, Peter,' she'd cry out for my father to protect her. 'There's a man, a man, he's coming in the window.' That murderous man came to get her so many nights. He was there to tell her she hadn't done enough. She should rise from her sleep and wash the kitchen floor again. Her father had repeatedly condemned all his daughters, in his Tolverse dialect, '*Quest' non mai ess' femin' della cas'* [You'll never make good house-wives]. In Italian it would be, *Questa non devono essere femine della casa*, but in any language it's the ethnic father's controlling insult.⁸⁰

In this passage it is possible to see how oppression by the patriarchal society these women lived in contributed to forms of anxiety and fear. Here, too, it is possible to establish a relationship with the myth of Persephone emerging in the act of the author's mother screaming at the image of the man who came to get her. These screams recall Persephone's when she is abducted by Hades while plucking the beautiful narcissus. Moreover, Clapps Herman's mother calls out for her husband's help. Similarly, Persephone calls out for her father, Zeus, when the abduction takes place. These women

⁸⁰ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 136.

lived with the fear of not being able to live up to the expectations the patriarchal society had imposed on them.

It is interesting to note that in the myth, at the moment of the abduction, Persephone calls out for her father's help, although Zeus does not intervene. Rather, he consents to the perpetration of the violence against his own daughter. It is Demeter, the mother, who comes to the aid of Persephone as soon as she hears her child screaming. One interpretation of the reason why Persephone would seek help from her father, rather than from her mother, could be found in the fact that, living in a society where men have the power, she appeals to the stronger force. Another interpretation offered by Agha-Jaffar is that women normally tend to seek appreciation from those who constantly try to obliterate their power.⁸¹ In her *Goddesses in Older Women*, however, Jean Shinoda Bolen argues that when women realize that those who occupy the highest positions do not take action to stop violence upon women – see for instance Zeus who helps Hades to abduct Persephone rather than protecting his own daughter – women begin to feel the urge to gain agency and fight for their own rights.⁸²

In *The Anarchist Bastard*, the author is woken up by her mother's screaming of terror numerous times – 'that murderous man came to get her so many nights'. This has instilled in her, night after night, since her childhood, a need to seek protection in women. For instance, Clapps Herman used to hide in her older sister's arms in fear when her mother screamed at night or had a fight with her husband. As the author writes:

Lucia and I are kneeling next to our bed to say our prayers because are parents are fighting again. [...] Even as I feel her panicky worries because of the voices rising

⁸¹ See Agha-Jaffar, p.38.

⁸² Jean Shinoda Bolen, *Goddess in Older Women: Archetypes in Women Over Fifty, Becoming a Juicy Crone* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), p. 13.

outside our room, I feel comforted because her slightly larger body is always in next-to-ness to mine.⁸³

Although evocative, images like that of Persephone screaming in a state of powerlessness and Penelope incessantly waiting for her husband's return represent anachronistic figures. They cannot provide points of reference for women living in the modern world. Simone De Beauvoir argues that women in mythological stories have proven to have neither agency nor subjectivity as they are defined through the male gaze.⁸⁴ Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues that 'old myths are invalid and crippling for women' as they are rooted in a patriarchal system.⁸⁵ Therefore, to gain voice and agency, women have to create a distance from myths and stop dreaming 'through the dreams of men'.⁸⁶ However, Hurst and Gubar argue that myth can offer a way to resist women's oppression when the myth is not simply accepted but reread for our times.⁸⁷ Such rereadings of myth allow a female author 'to write about the discrepancy between how she experiences herself and how she has been defined by her culture'.⁸⁸ For these reasons, it is not unusual that a writer like Clapps Herman, who studied and lived the myths of Homer, grew up nurturing the myth of Persephone and Demeter, and embraced feminism in the sixties, ended up questioning and challenging the injustices perpetrated by a patriarchal society through her choice of reworking the myth of Persephone as a means of denouncement and resistance.

⁸³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 108.

⁸⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. by H. M. Parshley, 1949 (New York: Bentam Books, 1970).

⁸⁵ Blau DuPlessis, p. 292.

⁸⁶ De Beauvoir, p. 132.

⁸⁷ Isobel Hurst, "'Love and Blackmail': Demeter and Persephone", *Classical Receptions Journal*, 4.2 (2012), 176–89; Susan Gubar, 'Mother, Maiden, and the Marriage of Death: Women Writers and an Ancient Myth', *Women's Studies*, 6 (1979), 301–15.

⁸⁸ Gubar, pp. 301–02.

As we have seen so far, Persephone is given the epithet of Demeter's daughter, symbolic of her condition of childhood. Homer, however, refers to her also as περίφρων, 'wise'. It might be interesting to note that Persephone acquires such an epithet only when captive in the Underworld and only after acquiring a higher status, that of Queen of the Underworld and Hades's consort. It can be argued this is symbolic of the patriarchal tradition imposing on women the obligation to marry to improve their status. Through marriage women take on the surname of their husband, thus passing from being defined as belonging to the father to belonging to the husband. Only by taking up the role of wife and quietly standing next to their men did women gain respect and were not considered outcasts. Moreover, as Agha-Jaffar has noted, when Persephone is underground she is silent.⁸⁹ When Hades informs her Queen she is allowed to join her mother in the upper world, Persephone 'eagerly leapt up for joy'.⁹⁰ One could provocatively ask, 'Can Persephone speak?' Women's silence is another aspect typical of a patriarchal society which we can read in Clapps Herman's memoir when the author portrays family moments when women appear to have no voice. For instance, the author recalls one of the many conversations that often took place between her mother and her aunts about the inequity of their father's choice to leave the farm to Rocky, the only male son. As Clapps Herman states, her grandfather 'had declared their work null and void'.⁹¹

The attempts of the author's female relatives at individualization or personal claim are constantly challenged by the patriarchal community where they were raised. In the memoir, the chapter 'The Anarchist Bastard' provides an example of the troubles an Italian woman had to face if she dared to question the male and father's authority:

⁸⁹ Agha-Jaffar, p. 50.

⁹⁰ Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, lines 370–371, p. 344.

⁹¹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 137.

We got beatings for nothing, just for looking at Papa the wrong way. When he came home from collecting the garbage he would be furious sometimes, and if you just looked at him the wrong way you really got it. [...] My sister Toni got it worst. She always answered back. She could never keep her mouth shut. She'd mutter under her breath and Papa would come after her terrible. Papa would take anything he could find, a stick, a broom, whatever he could lay his hands on and he'd go after her good. Really beat her. We'd want to run and hide.⁹²

The author's mother did not rebel nor challenge the authority of her father. Nonetheless, she ensured her own daughters would always have been able to defend themselves in modern society, and fought for their education. She was the one who insisted on sending them to college, thus challenging the stereotype of the ignorant Italian and of the submissive Italian woman. Going to college, the author received a classical education that allowed her to understand her family's lore through the lens of Greek literature and Homeric tradition. *The Anarchist Bastard* is the long awaited reply to the author's relatives who made fun of her and her mother for their recognition of the importance of a higher education.⁹³ One of the main features that makes memoir writing of particular interest to the modern world is, in fact, the possibility it offers to give voice to 'fragmentary and discontinuous narratives, which bespeak cultural as well as personal dislocation and fracture',⁹⁴ thus questioning history. Through *The Anarchist Bastard*, Clapps Herman translates into written words her family's oral stories and her own

⁹² Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 80.

⁹³ During the interview Clapps Herman said: 'Only eight of us out of seventeen went to College. And believe me, those families could have afforded that. All the kids who went to college left and travelled. Why didn't [my grandfather] send his two oldest grandchildren to college? Why not? He read the *New York Times* every day, he listened to the opera every week, he was a sophisticated man. I think it's a scandal that he didn't. See, he didn't want to spend the money. But he wanted to send my mother because she was his favourite daughter, but my grandmother wouldn't let her go because who knows: "Look what happens with that girls who go away". They eat the pomegranate seeds. I think you can easily say it: going to college is eating the pomegranate seeds. And d'you wanna know something? I ate the whole fruit!'

⁹⁴ Edvige Giunta, 'Teaching Memoir at Jersey City State College', pp. 80–89.

memories that informed her Italian American identity. In so doing, Clapps Herman leverages the potential democratic nature of the genre of the memoir and creates a bridge between the oral culture of her family – rooted in the Homeric tradition – and the written form. The genre of the memoir in this case does not solely offer a means to gain a voice and speak for oneself; rather, it is ‘an articulation of the cultural real that will change the conditions which have blocked those voices from talking’⁹⁵ and from emerging from a metaphoric underworld.

8. An Italian American upbringing through the language of Dante and Persephone

When urged by her husband to explore her Italian American upbringing and to write about it, Clapps Herman is bemused: ‘What would I write about? There was only a dark silence in the place he was asking me to call up into language. [...] I knew he was right yet I didn’t have a single word to say. [...] All that was still immersed in the languageless me.’⁹⁶ Clapps Herman’s silence could be compared to Persephone’s silence in the Underworld when the goddess is leaping with joy at the news of her reunion with her mother. Persephone’s action evokes the image of a child, as in fact the goddess is in transit between childhood – from which she is abruptly taken away – into womanhood – which Persephone acquires after being raped by her uncle Hades. The sudden change from childhood to womanhood, however, caught the goddess unprepared as she has not yet experienced the language of womanhood with which to identify herself. When Persephone becomes the Queen of the Underworld she is not aware of the

⁹⁵ Mas’ud Zavarzadeh and Donald Morton, *Theory, (Post)Modernity, Opposition: An ‘Other’ Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Washington, DC: Maisonneuve Press, 1991), p. 8.

⁹⁶ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 3.

power that springs, not so much from being a queen – she who can rule over the world of the dead – but rather, from the power of asserting her own voice, the power to exercise agency and which will allow her to get rid of the constraints that silence her.

In a similar fashion, Clapps Herman's 'languagelessness' is connected to her feelings of displacement in relation to her Italian American identity. 'What would I write about?' triggers a chain of questions: what does it mean to be Italian American? What is the difference between being Italian American in Waterbury and being Italian American in Manhattan? Is this dilemma worthy of being told? How can this experience be articulated? As we have seen so far, Clapps Herman's memoir revolves around these questions, and the author explores the possible answers by means of intersecting her family's story with the mythic space of the Homeric tradition and Greek mythologies. Because language is the main way an individual expresses his/her own identity, 'the place where our bodies and minds collide, where our groundedness in place and time and our capacity for fantasy and invention must come to terms',⁹⁷ in the memoir chapter 'Words and Rags' Clapps Herman investigates these questions by looking at her family language. The dialect spoken by the Clapps foregrounds their sense of *Italianità* and belonging to the Waterbury Italian community. As the author writes: 'The daily use of dialect words in the course of the day is one of the ways we knew we were Italian and not Italian-American.'⁹⁸ The dialect is the language the Clapps speak inside their house to refer to things relating to the house itself or food, insults, mess, confusion, and vulgarities. The dialect spoken in the house taught the author a clear sense of how proud her family felt towards their place of origin. The author's family, in fact, privileged the dialect over standard Italian. Moreover, they would use the dialect to address one

⁹⁷ Alice Yaeger Kaplan, 'On Language Memoir', in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. by Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), pp. 59–70 (p. 64).

⁹⁸ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 145.

another according to their region of origin. They would call each other *Tolverse* (from Tolve) or *Avignanese* (from Avignano) but would say *Italian* in English: ‘We usually pronounce the word *Italian* in English except when we’re talking to our relatives from the other side, but we always say *Tolverse*, *Avignanese*, *Siciliana*.’⁹⁹ This emphasis on their southern origins was exaggerated as a means of defence against Italians who migrated to America from northern regions and ‘as a way of reifying distinctions between people who live in juxtaposition to one another’ as well as ‘to remain apart from the de-ethnicizing process’.¹⁰⁰ The author’s family’s will to identify themselves as Southerners is a reaction to the racism expressed by northern Italians, who used to address southerners as Arabs and Africans: “‘Those Arabs down there, those Africans’”, they still say as they dismiss our people with a laugh and a head tossed in contempt, so afraid that they might be connected to us.’¹⁰¹ As northern Italians did not want to be associated with Southerners, Clapps Herman grew up with a strong sense of belonging to the south, inscribed in the everyday dialect of the Waterbury community.

The author learnt about what was called ‘real Italian’ by her American schoolteacher, Miss Collins. While a young Clapps Herman was talking with her school friends about ‘*a’bizz*’, Miss Collins told her it was not an Italian word and that in Italy they call it ‘*La Pizza*’, which means pie.¹⁰² Clapps Herman is profoundly offended at this remark. How could an American woman possibly know better than her Italian family their very own language? The contempt towards her teacher’s words, which

⁹⁹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 145.

¹⁰⁰ Fredrik Barth, ‘Ethnic Processes on the Pathan-Baluch Boundary’, in *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, ed. by John J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972), pp. 454–64; Bonnie Urciuoli, ‘Language and Borders’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24 (1995), 525–46; *The Handbook of Language and Ethnic Identity*, ed. by Joshua A. Fishman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, ‘Language and Identity’, in *A Companion to Linguistic Anthropology*, ed. by Alessandro Duranti (Oxford: Basil, 2003), pp. 368–94 (p. 371).

¹⁰¹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 152.

¹⁰² Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 146.

aimed to annihilate her family's history and their very same existence, finds its epicentre in the author's description of what it means to live in her family language:

What did she know? [...] She wasn't the one who made the weekly bread supply along with 'a bizz' – to be eaten on Saturdays – in the wood oven Grampa built for his 'a figliol' (young girl), Gramma, down by the road once a week. She didn't help to slaughter a pig and then pour boiling water on the pig's skin to get the hair off, then gut its innards so that we could roast the pig carcass on a spit, or butcher it in order to make *salsiccia* for the *ragu*, or 'a *salsiccia* that was then dried and preserved in *olio di'oliv'*. She didn't cure the *prosciutt'*, can the peaches. She hadn't gotten up before dawn to feed the chickens, collect the eggs, milk the cows before she went to school as my mother and her sisters did. She didn't shovel pig shit into barrels to fertilize the garden.

Miss Collins doesn't know the smell of pig shit on a hot summer day that filled the nostrils of my mother and her sisters as they picked bones out of the pig manure to sell, because it was a hard time for her family.¹⁰³



Figure 10 - Making 'a bizz; Waterbury.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 148.

¹⁰⁴ Courtesy of Joanna Clapps Herman.

Although the author employs punctuation in this passage, the hammering use of the conjunction *then* to link all the actions elides the commas and strengthens the author's anger in a stream of consciousness. The author quickly replies to her teacher, calling upon bitter memories of her mother's and her aunts' childhood. They grew up 'in the smell of pig shit on a hot summer day that filled the nostrils', but those very same actions were necessary in order to provide the family with what the wonderful essence of their *italianness* was: *salsiccia, ragu, olio di' oliv', prosciutt'* and much more. The use of crude verbs like *to slaughter, to gut, to butcher* preceded by the negations *she wasn't, she didn't* address Clapps Herman's hostility towards the ignorance of what the author's family language conveyed: *to make; life; to make life*; an authentic testimony of the migratory experience of Italians in America and their hard work to make this experience successful – for themselves and for their children.

Later, the author shows that Miss Collins also ignored that her family language derives from Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In his work, in fact, the poet uses the first-person *saccio* to say 'I know'. In the standard Italian, this form has changed into *so* but the poet's language is still preserved in the author's family dialect: '*Ma chi sacci, i sacci, no sacci'i*'.¹⁰⁵ Also the word *sciagurato*, 'a person with a slovenly nature',¹⁰⁶ employed by Dante, is part and parcel of Clapps Herman's daily childhood life: '*Chiest' femmine si chiamano sciaguratu', remanesc' senz u' marit' e senz'innammurat'*. These bad women who are called *sciagurat'* wind up without a husband or a lover.'¹⁰⁷

Dante and Persephone share the experience of the Underworld. Dante, in fact, journeys through the *Inferno* and then emerges to tell his experience and the lessons learnt from the world of the dead. Before Clapps Herman, Helen Barolini engaged with

¹⁰⁵ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁶ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁷ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 150.

the images of Dante and Persephone in her novel *Umbertina*.¹⁰⁸ According to Edvige Giunta:

In Barolini's novel, Dante does not embody a literary tradition that was truly foreign to Italian American immigrants, but rather represents one gate through which an Italian American woman can begin to explore and incorporate Italian mythologies and histories into Italian American cultural life.¹⁰⁹

Clapps Herman, on the other hand, turns to Dante to place her family's lore into history. This connection is the evidence that the author's family language is not only real and alive, but is rooted in one of the most important works that shaped and forged the Italian language, *The Divine Comedy*. Analogously to Persephone, who only speaks once she emerges from the Underworld, the author is able to place her family's language into history only after emerging from her own inner journey into silence and self-discovery. As the author writes: 'Only now do I have the words to explain what I knew was wrong but couldn't possibly have explained back then.'¹¹⁰

The references to Dante and Homer bear historical significance in Clapps Herman's memoir. 'Historical specificity is of prime importance',¹¹¹ as Anthony Tamburri argues; nonetheless, 'Dante and his more recent confreres [...] are not the major players in the greater sociological landscape [...] of the United States.'¹¹² Ethnicity is a human product, a socio-political invention, which 'differentiates only insofar as it points out the major characteristics of one group as compared with those of

¹⁰⁸ Helen Barolini, *Umbertina* (New York: Seaview, 1979).

¹⁰⁹ Edvige Giunta, 'Afterwords', in Helen Barolini, *Umbertina* (New York: Feminist Press, 1999), pp. 425–53 (p. 442).

¹¹⁰ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 148.

¹¹¹ Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*, p. 129.

¹¹² Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*, p. 129.

another.¹¹³ As differences emerge, however, analogies are present too. For instance, in the chapter ‘Words and Rags’, Clapps Herman says that one day in her class she told her students about her grandmother’s healing chant: ‘*San’ e san’, ogg’ ruot, e crai è san’*. Heal, heal, today broken, tomorrow healed.’¹¹⁴ A Puerto Rican student said that her grandmother used to sing the exact same healing chant. Surprised by that revelation, the author writes:

Did that healing song travel the Mediterranean from southern Italy to North Africa to Spain, then to the New World? Did the Spanish bring it home with them after they conquered southern Italy? Did they bring it to us when they came and lived among us? This map of oral language was preserved in invisible ink in my family and connected me to this woman’s family.¹¹⁵

Clapps Herman’s narrative, thus, is one that promotes the overcoming of racism and prejudice by looking at analogies between other ethnic groups in America. The dialogue between different ethnic groups, Tamburri argues, ‘responds to a necessity of inclusiveness’.¹¹⁶ It is crucial because, without exchange and openness, Italian Americans risk perpetrating ‘the obvious aesthetic hierarchy of a major literature and numerous minor literatures’ as well as the risk to remain crystallized ‘within a thematically grounded discourse of nostalgia, for which leitmotifs such as *pizza* and *nonna* continue to possess high aesthetic currency’.¹¹⁷

Clapps Herman’s narrative addresses these issues by looking at the history of the author’s family language and emphasizing its rich cultural past. As Clapps Herman writes:

¹¹³ Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*, p. 130.

¹¹⁴ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 151.

¹¹⁵ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 151.

¹¹⁶ Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*, p. 131.

¹¹⁷ Tamburri, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity*, p. 131.

We're an ancient Semitic, Phoenician, Greek, Byzantine, Anatolian, maybe even Roman *misconbrulia*, mixed-up mess or confusion, an island of people that came loose from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, more Near Eastern than Western, but from which in desperation, at the end of the nineteenth century, we floated ourselves across the Mediterranean in bits and pieces, in such tiny pieces we floated one or two people at a time through the Straits of Gibraltar and washed up on the shores of America. We collected in threes and fours along the edges of America. We made communities where the ancient mores of our culture preserve something so old it doesn't have a written record, only a song here and a rag there.¹¹⁸

The author's family dialect, thus, is an expression of the encounter of different people; a language that, although changing through time and different colonizations, arrived to the author in all its power inscribed in the encoding of the core values and mythologies that underpin her Italian American upbringing.

10. Conclusion

Developing an empowering self through the reworking of the ancient Greek texts and mythology has been a difficult process for Clapps Herman, who had to relive and understand the conditions of migration of her family before being able to understand her own. Her condition of not being able to find a sense of stable location and belonging in relation to her ethnic identity is first and foremost related to the lack of historical acknowledgement of the Italian migration in America. 'One of the most troubling of social phenomena,' as Annette Wheeler Cafarelli argues, 'is the way Italian immigrants

¹¹⁸ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 152.

and their offspring have been denied their claim to the artistic and intellectual heritage of Italy'.¹¹⁹ In the interview I conducted with Clapps Herman, the author explained that before writing her memoir she underwent a phase of depression that prevented her from writing for five years: 'I got so depressed I could barely function. One could say I went underground.'¹²⁰ We could link the phase of depression to Clapps Herman's perception of alienation from American society. As she explains in the introduction to her memoir, one night she was at a party and spent the whole time talking to an Italian woman whom nobody liked. After the party the author asked herself:

Why *had* I spent the whole night talking to a crazy woman? In my sad reflection in the car window I saw the answer. I was that *desperate*, that *lonely*, and that filled with longing to talk to someone who knew intimately both of my spheres, my Italian world and the life of the mind, that I didn't care that she had been a lunatic.¹²¹

The feeling of loneliness and isolation underpins the reasons that led Clapps Herman to relentlessly work to put together the Italian American anthologies. Barolini writes that:

Italian American women have long been denied the possibility of finding themselves in literature. Where are our models, the voices that speak for and of us? How can we affirm an identity without becoming familiar with the models by which to perceive ourselves? [...] We are what we read, but in the case of Italian American women writers, we seldom read who we are.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Annette Wheeler Cafarelli, 'No Butter on Our Bread: Anti-Intellectual Stereotyping of Italian Americans', *Voices in Italian Americana*, 7.1 (1996), 39–47 (p. 40).

¹²⁰ Interview with Clapps Herman, (21 June 2013). See appendix, p. 302.

¹²¹ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 1.

¹²² Barolini, *The Dream Book*, p. 22.

In the anthologies *Our Roots are Deep with Passion* and *Wild Dreams* which Clapps Herman coedited, she crossed paths with other Italian American women authors and their personal stories. By means of sharing her own experience and memories of growing up as an Italian American woman with other Italian American women authors and artists, Clapps Herman found comfort and a new sense of family. This fruitful conversation with other Italian American fellow women authors empowered Clapps Herman to collect her own stories and to give birth to *The Anarchist Bastard*.

Although in 1985 Richard Alba argued that Italian American ethnicity has entered its twilight, and in the near future it will no longer be possible to talk about an Italian American generation,¹²³ Clapps Herman's works contribute to the debate about Italian Americans living in America. The memoir, then, nestles in the heart of the process of recovering 'historical amnesia' and the ethnic awakening that has been developing among the Italian American community. Works like Clapps Herman's speak for the generations of Italian American people who still have the urge to explore their ethnic identity and to make themselves visible – despite the slow process of assimilation that followed the initial feelings of xenophobia against Italian American people after WWII.¹²⁴

The recovery of literature and myth in Clapps Herman's memoir stresses the importance of the role of memory in unearthing the fractures and trauma inherent the process of migration as inherited by the descendants of the first generation of Italian Americans. Homer's epic and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, as they are articulated in *The Anarchist Bastard*, demonstrate Clapps Herman's effort to investigate her sense of loss and identity fragmentation which persist even a century after the

¹²³ Richard D. Alba, *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985).

¹²⁴ See for instance Guglielmo and Salerno; Bevilacqua, De Clementi, and Franzina.

beginning of the Italian mass migration to the United States. Clapps Herman writes a memoir in which the interplay of memory, mythology, and history, on the one hand, debunks the stereotype of the illiterate Italian Americans; on the other hand, such interplay contributes to creating a bridge between Italy and America. The way Clapps Herman engages with the myth differs from Caperna Lloyd, who embarked on a physical quest to trace the history of Demeter and Persephone in Sicily. At the same time, it is also different from the way Ragusa reworks the image of the young goddess. Whereas Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa call on Persephone to describe a process of identity evolution, Clapps Herman seems to be at ease with the mythic space of the Homeric tradition. It is a world she feels comfortable with and which, in *The Anarchist Bastard*, welcomes the reader who can witness how Clapps Herman fuses Persephone's narrative with her own. As Sarup argues, identity transcends questions of being to, rather, stress a process of becoming. In this sense we can see that the myth of Persephone is pivotal in Clapps Herman's experience insofar as it empowers the author to write, which is the means through which Clapps Herman 'can become'.¹²⁵ The memoir, allowing Clapps Herman to resolve her question of becoming through writing, is a means of self-discovery and a hymn to her family's mythic roots.

¹²⁵ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 162.

Conclusion

This thesis has investigated the relevant and consistent presence of the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone in third-generation Italian American women's memoirs. As discussed, Goeller's essay, 'Persephone Goes Home', as well as Giunta's essay, 'Persephone's Daughters', argue that there is a conspicuous body of Italian American women's literary texts that employ the myth of Persephone to tackle issues of identity construction; such issues are connected with questions of gender, class, race, and ethnicity. A highly evocative and familiar narrative, this myth has allowed Italian American women writers and artists to reconnect with their ancestral and ethnic past.

In this thesis, I have focused on the interlacing of myth and memory in three contemporary Italian American memoirs: *No Pictures in my Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily*; *The Skin between Us: A Memoir of Race, Beauty, and Belonging*; and *The Anarchist Bastard: Growing Up Italian in America*, respectively written by Susan Caperna Lloyd, Kym Ragusa, and Joanna Clapps Herman. These texts have offered insightful perspectives on the myth while also posing questions of difference, gender, race, ethnicity, self-representation, and post-modern identity.

The interplay of myth and memory encoded in Italian American women's writings has been examined by comparing these women's narratives to Persephone's journey – an identity quest without easy resolutions. Violently taken away from her mother, Demeter, who represents the world of light and safety, Persephone develops her selfhood as a woman in the underworld, the kingdom of darkness and uncertainty, but also of self-discovery. In a similar fashion, the Italian American women's memoirs examined here map out journeys in search of a viable identity, one that is rooted in the Italian past but that also allows for an authentic sense of female selfhood to emerge.

Following the three main scenes of the myth of Persephone (the abduction, the descent and journey into the kingdom of Hades, and the return to the upper world), I have argued that, whereas for first-generation Italian American women the separation and figurative abduction corresponds to the forceful abandonment of their motherland, Italy, for third-generation Italian American women, it is understood as a moment of conflict and fracture between the old and the new world. These women's journeys in the 'realm of darkness' become an exploration of the past of their ancestors, their families, and ultimately themselves through the recovery of individual and collective memory.

No Pictures in my Grave, *The Skin between Us*, and *The Anarchist Bastard* belong to the hybrid genre of memoir, a genre that combines memory and imagination. However, whereas Caperna Lloyd writes a travel memoir and Clapps Herman writes a family memoir, Ragusa's text combines travel and family memoir. The different subcategories of memoir employed by the authors prove how this literary expression of life writing is a genre that allows for a constant redefinition of strict and limiting boundaries. We can argue that, because of its potential to undo canonical literary norms, memoir, borrowing Graziella Parati's definition of autobiography, is 'a hybrid and malleable genre that partakes of other genres and becomes a literary space where a woman can experiment with the construction of a female "I" and, sometimes, a feminist identity'.¹

In the memoirs examined in this thesis, the fabrication of a female subjectivity emerges in the different approaches to the myth of Persephone adopted by the authors. In *No Pictures in my Grave*, Caperna Lloyd enacts a physical quest for Demeter and Persephone while traveling in Sicily. In particular, the discovery of the myth has been

¹ Graziella Parati, *Public History, Private Stories: Italian Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 2.

of extreme importance for Caperna Lloyd to revise her Italian Catholic roots which nourished her Italian American identity during her childhood. Similarly, Ragusa has reworked the myth and adopted it as a strong image of identification that has helped her to articulate her biracial identity. In Clapps Herman's memoir, on the other hand, the myth fluidly flows into the narrative. Whereas Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa assign to Persephone an important part in their books and specifically refer to the goddess and her story as a personal narrative, in Clapps Herman's book it is possible to note a different use of the myth. Similarly to Caperna Lloyd, the myth of Persephone evokes Clapps Herman's relationship with her Catholic upbringing in Waterbury. On another level, however, in *The Anarchist Bastard* the myth is not employed as a means of identification and self-representation. Rather, it is a pervasive narrative resurrected also in patterns of mythical allusion. These can be interpreted, for instance, in the parallels between the myth's story and the life of the Becces and the Clapps in Waterbury which Clapps Herman describes; or, again, in the mother-daughter bond as analysed through the Greek value of *nekyia*.

The different unfoldings of the myth of Persephone can be traced to the way the authors' sense of ethnicity and *Italianità* was kept alive and handed down within their families. Caperna Lloyd's and Ragusa's relationship with their Italian identity is fostered by their fathers and paternal grandmothers. As emerges from *The Family Baggage*, however, Caperna Lloyd's father was a solitary man, who would often go away fishing on his own. For this reason, Caperna Lloyd has described him as an 'absentee father' to herself and her siblings.² Moreover, there seemed to be a conflicting relationship between Caperna Lloyd's parents, as the author's mother, an American

² Caperna Lloyd, *The Family Baggage*.

woman, did not accept the strict and traditional Italian values her husband imposed on the family. As the author writes in her memoir: ‘The thing that made our family different was my mother’s ongoing struggle for independence from a tradition-minded Italian husband.’³ Therefore, Caperna Lloyd’s Italian identity was moulded in relation to her grandmother Carolina – ‘a superstitious and melancholy mother’,⁴ and a Sorrowful Madonna. Similarly to Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa’s sense of *Italianità* was subject to a process of constant negotiation. Moreover, as she writes in chapter five of her memoir, her father, like Caperna Lloyd’s, was an absent figure, particularly throughout Ragusa’s early childhood. He, nevertheless, contributed to the author’s awareness of and appreciation for her Italian identity. As Ragusa writes:

My *italianità* [...] was something my father encouraged from the beginning, a claiming of me in terms of our shared ethnicity, our common connection to a faraway land that seemed to me out of a fairy tale.⁵

This quote reinforces our discussion on how Ragusa considered the Italian world a mythical dimension, a distant place to revisit through the myth of Persephone. Throughout their childhood and adulthood, Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa maintained a somewhat ambivalent, as well as conflictual, connection with their Italian identity. On the other hand, Clapps Herman was born to Italian American parents and raised in Waterbury, an Italian American community in Connecticut. The author never came to understand her *Italianità* as ambivalent, as it has, at times, been for Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa. As Clapps Herman has declared:

³ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 31.

⁴ Caperna Lloyd, *The Family Baggage*.

⁵ Kym Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 105.

I'm not ambivalent about the divided identity – rather I'd say I am the embodiment of that divided identity – so rather in constant conflict. Ambivalence to me suggests uncomfortable and not wishing to be Italian American. And I love my identity as a southern Italian woman. I just feel deep *nostos* and sadness and as if I have never fully integrated these two disparate identities. I am an American woman, but deeply in my skin, in my bones I am more southern Italian, even if southern Italians wouldn't recognize what I mean by that.⁶

Therefore, Clapps Herman's journey of reconciliation with her Italian identity is rooted in the mythic space of the Homeric epics and myths the author refers to in her memoir. These work as guidelines that contribute to the author's understanding of her family's origins and codes of behaviour which had led Clapps Herman to experience a condition of 'languagelessness'.

Caperna Lloyd had a strong relationship with her grandmother Carolina and such a bond was pivotal for the author to nurture her sense of *Italianità*. However, it was not Carolina who passed down the myth of Persephone to her niece. Rather, Caperna Lloyd found out about Persephone and Demeter during her first trip to Sicily, where she went to follow the Easter Procession of the Mysteries. Ragusa, instead, was in touch with the story of the myth as a sign of her Italian ethnic past since she was a child. Miriam, her African American grandmother, used to tell Ragusa the story of the myth when the author was a child. As Ragusa writes: 'A black woman with [...] a desperate love of books, she found a way to put the story of Persephone and Demeter [...] into my hands. She claimed it for all of us.'⁷ In Clapps Herman's *The Anarchist Bastard*, the myth's narrative emerges as part and parcel of the author's cultural baggage, together with the Greek values ruling the Clapps in Waterbury. That

⁶ This piece of information was given to me by Joanna Clapps Herman in our email exchange, 9 September 2014.

⁷ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 107.

Persephone's story is a highly familiar narrative to the author can be noted in the way Clapps Herman never mentions how she became acquainted with the myth. As Clapps Herman said to me during our interview, she is not sure when she heard or read about the myth for the first time. She is, nevertheless, well aware of the first time the myth greatly impacted her as a narrative of origins. This occurred during her young adulthood when she was working as a school teacher and read the myth to her class 'with great *gravitas*',⁸ as Clapps Herman remembers. One of the students said he did not believe that story was true but to Clapps Herman, on the contrary, the narrative of the myth was real and highly symbolic of what being an Italian in Waterbury meant. So much so that, when the student spoke those words, Clapps Herman was hurt. As she stated:

That impacted me so profoundly [...] It was just like, you know, if I was somebody who cried easily, I would have cried instantly. It was that powerful! [...] I realized in that moment that that myth belonged to me in a completely different way and there was no question in my mind [...] that's what my life is about, my life was exactly like that, it was like 'Oh my God!' No wonder I'm so drawn to this! It's so strong for me.⁹

The student's words marked the moment of fracture that pushed Clapps Herman to initiate a process of revision of the rules defining her hybrid and liminal identity as an Italian American woman.

Caperna Lloyd's and Ragusa's relationship with the myth is more mysterious compared to Clapps Herman's. Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa put in motion an actual process of rediscovery and reappropriation of the myth by means of travelling to Sicily. Although Caperna Lloyd's family is native to Terracina, it is Sicily that becomes the ground for the author's reclamation of her ethnic identity. There, in fact, Caperna Lloyd

⁸ Interview with Clapps Herman, (21 June, 2013). See appendix p. 276.

⁹ Interview with Clapps Herman, (21 June, 2013). See appendix p. 277.

was able to establish an immediate connection with the Sorrowful Madonna carried in effigy by the people of Trapani during the Easter procession. Caperna Lloyd interprets the history of the Sorrowful Madonna as a hybrid narrative mixing Christian and pagan traditions, rooted in the myth of Persephone. This reading allows Caperna Lloyd to redeem the memory of her grandmother as a sorrowful mother. The author equates Carolina to the Black Maddonna who becomes an empowering symbol insofar as Caperna Lloyd is able to write that this Madonna

[...] represented [...] everything: the life and death of crops, animals, people, and souls [...] she was both Attis and Cybele, both Demeter and Persephone. [...] She was not sorrowing or distraught. [...] She just *was*, exuding power and self-assurance.¹⁰

Ragusa, on the other hand, articulates her process of ethnic claiming and self-definition by means of shifting the axis of the myth from the Homeric version to the Ovidian interpretation. The shifting, as argued, epitomizes the symbolic passage from darkness to light. The phase in which Ragusa employs the Homeric representation of Persephone corresponds to a time of darkness because in the Homeric version Persephone is the victim of violence perpetrated by Hades with the complicity and the silence of Zeus, Persephone's father. At the end of the story, then, Persephone has to negotiate her life between the upper and the underworld. The goddess is, thus, understood by Ragusa as a link between two antithetical realities, just as she has had to constantly travel between Harlem and New Jersey to divide herself between her two grandmothers, Gilda and Miriam. The Ovidian version, on the other hand, represents a moment of light, the period in which Ragusa gains awareness about her median position between her

¹⁰ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 139.

grandmothers, as well as between her different communities of belonging. Ragusa's feelings of empowerment are rendered through the image of redemption of Persephone the author portrays.

Caperna Lloyd's and Ragusa's books foreground the central contribution of women in fostering, transmitting, and keeping ethnicity alive for second- and third-generation Italian American women.¹¹ They also testify to the crucial role of the grandmother as a 'mythic *figura*',¹² connecting a hazy past with the present. As these memoirs have shown, moreover, the way the grandmother contributes to keeping ethnicity alive does not occur only through the stories these women hand down to the following generations. Rather, it can be argued that, for third-generation Italian American women, the grandmother *figura* has at times enabled them to enact a process of ethnic rediscovery through a real physical quest. While the grandmothers pass down a sense of ethnicity (through, for instance, food, dialect, religion, and stories about Italy), at the same time, they unconsciously encourage modalities of ethnic appropriation which are at odds with the Italian tradition and values of domesticity, obedience, and sacrifice they embody. For instance, as we have seen in *No Pictures in my Grave*, as well as in *The Skin between Us*, the authors start their ethnic quest travelling on their own, thus sharing the 'portrait of the *puttana*' with Louise DeSalvo.¹³ On the contrary, Clapps Herman's journey is an internal one. Such a journey is articulated through the Greek values of *nostos*, *xenia*, and *nekyia* embedded in Homeric literature. Exploring and linking Greek mythology to her family's life in Waterbury, the author questions,

¹¹ See Gabaccia, 'Italian American Women', p. 6, and the introduction to this thesis, p. 15.

¹² Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets*, p. 121.

¹³ See Chapter 1, p. 71. See also Louise DeSalvo, 'A Portrait of the *Puttana* as a Middle-Aged Woolf Scholar', in *Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, Teachers and Artists Write about their Work on Women*, ed. by Carol Ascher, Louise DeSalvo, and Sara Ruddick (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984), pp. 35–54.

rediscovers, and proudly claims her southern Italian ethnicity. The reworking of the Greek literature Clapps Herman explores has led her to conjure up the hardship faced by her family and Italian migrants. Therefore, it has been crucial for her to fill in the gaps of her memory about her ancestors' past. Such an understanding has ultimately enabled Clapps Herman to come to terms with her Italian American identity, as well as with the anxiety she experienced as an in-between subject on the *limen*.

In the memoirs examined in this thesis, it has been possible to follow the authors' process of transformation and quest for selfhood. In their books, Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman are liminal subjects who struggle to find a fruitful way to negotiate their ethnic and hybrid identity. In order to grapple with and resolve their in-between position, the authors have turned to the act of writing. The page of the memoir has become a threshold these women have aimed to cross. The threshold marks a moment of initiation and it is at once symbolic of the status of no longer and not yet held by the subject who, like the authors, stands on the *limen*. This moment of evolution can be seen in the way these women have represented themselves through their writings, which goes beyond the mere polarization of 'Italian American woman'. In these memoirs, Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman have come to understand that 'Italian American woman' is a more complex and multifarious ground of discovery. The experience of crossing the threshold, interpreted as the experience of writing, becomes a poignant moment of identity search that, as we have seen, has cut across the history and predicament of Italian migrants in the United States, as well as issues of hospitality, gender, gender and mobility, race, ethnicity, class, and religion.

The Final Departure

In the final scene of *Nuovomondo*, the journey of the migrants, which began with the abandonment of their land, ends with the arrival of the ship at Ellis Island. Ellis Island constitutes the possible final step of the migrants' journey. Once there, in fact, migrants were subject to medical and intelligence tests before being allowed to enter and remain in America.¹⁴ The youngest member of the Mancusos, Pietro, is initially marked as 'mute'. Pietro, in fact, shows his reluctance at the forced migration he has to undertake with his family by choosing to remain silent – he does not speak a word for the whole movie. At Ellis Island, during the medical examinations, the American inspectors think he is mute and label him as 'unfit' to stay in the new world. Fortunata, the Mancusos' matriarch who embarked on the long and debilitating journey together with her son and nephews, refuses to be tested and, therefore, she is judged mentally unstable. Because neither Pietro nor Fortunata can stay in the new world, Salvatore Mancuso has to decide whether to send his mother and son back home on their own, or leave his dream of building a new life in America behind and return to Sicily with his family. Suddenly, Pietro turns the tables and, to everyone's surprise, he speaks, revealing Fortunata's wish to return home on her own. The movie is, thus, framed by a circular narrative: opening with the image of void, fracture, and the abandonment of the motherland, *Nuovomondo* closes with another scene of separation from the maternal womb.¹⁵ If the initial moment of separation depicted in the movie's scene of the departure evoked the compelling

¹⁴ During examinations, the migrants with medical problems were chalk-marked 'E' if they had trachoma, a contagious eye disease; 'L' for lameness, or 'X' for mental disability. See Rita G. Koman, 'Ellis Island: The Immigrants' Experience', *OAH Magazine of History*, 13.4: The Gilded Age (1999), 31–37 (p. 32). For a further study on the laws, regulation, and praxes regulating the migrants' arrival at Ellis Island, see for instance Amy L. Fairchild, *Science at the Borders: Immigrant Medical Inspection and the Shaping of the Modern Industrial Labor Force* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003); Ronald H. Bayor, *Encountering Ellis Island: How European Immigrants Entered America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

¹⁵ See Billi.

scene of Persephone's abduction through the images of severance and abyss, this final act of *Nuovomondo* conjures up the moment in which the goddess, forced to leave Demeter's protection, begins her journey of self-discovery and becomes the queen of Hades' kingdom. As the myth and *Nuovomondo* beautifully portray, the separation from the maternal womb is a painful though essential part of life that enables children to develop their quest for identity. Only by leaving Demeter can the naïve Kore become Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld; similarly, only by letting Fortunata go can the Mancusos start their new life in America.

Sven Birkerts has argued that 'the mother is not hard to find – if anything, she is hard to get away from'.¹⁶ The authors investigated in this thesis, like Persephone, have experienced the journey between origins and destination. This journey has led them to understand the importance of severing ties with their own mothers, grandmothers, and mythic ancestors, in order to develop their own quest for selfhood. Caperna Lloyd is able to free herself from the psychological heavy baggage epitomized by the author's memory of Carolina only when she is able to acknowledge the differences between Carolina, her mother, and herself. As the author writes: 'How different were the hearths that Grandmother, my mother, and I had experienced!'¹⁷ And further, in the final scene of her memoir in which she is carrying the *ceto* of the Sorrowful Madonna together with the *portatori*, she writes:

With the portatori, I cried. [...] I cried for so many things [...] But these were tears I had never experienced before. They were not the tears of Carolina [...] They were the tears of the joyous Black Madonna, of Cybele, of L'Addolorata, of the thankful Demeter having found her daughter again. I, too, had found the lost part of myself.¹⁸

¹⁶ Sven Birkerts, *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2008), p. 118.

¹⁷ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 154.

¹⁸ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 188.

In *The Skin between Us*, Ragusa turns to the female characters of her family to trace a line of connection between them all. To Ragusa, these women constitute ‘a lineage of mothers and daughters’, who, like Demeter and Persephone, separate from each other, only to find themselves over and over again. What Ragusa inherited from them ‘is the loss, the search, the story’.¹⁹ To understand these women is crucial for Ragusa to define herself as a hybrid subject descending from ‘the intricate crossings of blood, class, and culture that made us what we are’.²⁰ Her ancestors, ‘with their light skin and straight hair and Mae’s crooked spelling, [...] were the embodiment of the margins, of the in-between space that [she], too, would inhabit’.²¹

Similarly to Caperna Lloyd and Ragusa, Clapps Herman also explores the past of the women of her family. Clapps Herman writes about the conflicting relationship between her paternal great-grandmother, Philomena, and Bessie, the paternal grandmother the author never met; she also writes about her relationship with her own mother and sister. These women are central to the author’s female identity construction, which revolves around the traditions that the women of the author’s family used to hand down from one generation to the next. As she writes: ‘[...] all the womanly skills passed to us girls, these are all part of my understanding of who I am, who I will become’.²² At the same time, however, the author knows she has to find distance from them to develop her ‘way of not being [her] mother, of not being [her] sister’.²³

Caperna Lloyd’s, Ragusa’s, and Clapps Herman’s journeys, thus, begin with the experience of fracture between the old and the new world, the known and the unknown that marked their process of hybrid identity negotiation. At the same time, *No Pictures*

¹⁹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 237.

²⁰ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 73.

²¹ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 67.

²² Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 161.

²³ Clapps Herman, *The Anarchist Bastard*, p. 161.

in *my Grave*, *The Skin between Us*, and *The Anarchist Bastard*, conclude themselves with images of empowerment: Caperna Lloyd is able to ‘cross the limen’ as ‘the goddess’ she ‘had sought’ as well as ‘unafraid’;²⁴ Ragusa chooses to identify herself with the image of Persephone ‘choosing her own fate’;²⁵ and Clapps Herman, through the writing of her parents’ love story – which the author has defined as ‘epic’²⁶ – has shown the crucial role of memory as a fundamental value that can help liminal subjects to step across the threshold as an ‘unafraid Persephone’.

These empowering images exemplify how the practice of writing a memoir can take shape as a circular journey of loss and discovery. Writing a memoir, these authors have proven, can encompass a healing journey for the wounded and fragile subject who is eventually able to gain self-assurance by leveraging the cohesion of myth and memory.

Classica Italian Americana

Myth in literature is relevant when wanting to establish a literary tradition and a line of continuity among a corpus of texts, but also to establish a dialogue with other texts and other literatures. For instance, Meyer Reinhold introduced the term *Classica Americana* to express the recurrent employment of Greek and Roman mythology in American

²⁴ Caperna Lloyd, *No Pictures in my Grave*, p. 188.

²⁵ Ragusa, *The Skin between Us*, p. 238.

²⁶ *The Anarchist Bastard* closes with the image of Rose – Clapps Herman’s mother – who, affected by dementia, does not remember her husband, Peter Clapps. She says: ‘[...] Who is that? Well, that’s a strange name. I don’t remember anyone like that. [...] Well, then I guess he was the one. The most important thing that ever happened to me was whoever it was that I fell in love with.’ With regard to this final moment, Clapps Herman said: ‘I was very thrilled when I realised that that was going to be the last chapter. I struggled very hard to think what is going to go where. How things should go. ’Cause I didn’t write it [the memoir] in a sequence. When I realised that was the last chapter I was so happy. [...] My father and mother’s love story was epic. There was no story: my mother [...] was so madly in love with him, and he with her. Even until the very end, the day he died. They just loved each other so profoundly and to me that she didn’t remember his name but she still knew that whomever it was that she had loved it was the most important thing that ever happened to her [...] when she said that to me I wrote that note down and then I lost it.’ See appendix, p. 304.

literature.²⁷ In a similar fashion, Michele Ronnick has investigated the influence of classical mythologies in African American literature and promoted the sub-field of *Classica Africana*.²⁸ Italian American writers and artists have often turned to Greek and Roman mythology as a source for literary experimentation and creativity, so much so that it could even be possible to theorize a *Classica Italian Americana* area of scholarship. As Patrice Rankine points out, the merit of Ronnick's pioneering study was that it advocated for new trajectories to investigate literature and the way past and memory influence our present. As he writes: 'This work was asking for a change in the subject of inquiry, a shift from how we construct the past to how the past influences present thought. (In the end we cannot answer one without the other).'²⁹ The way we make sense of the past and are able to construct the past is crucial, as much as the way such a constructed past translates and transforms our present reality. One of the reasons Italian American writers engage with mythology in their works, as this thesis has investigated, is, indeed, to challenge and resist the notion that the past cannot be changed, and therefore that their story cannot be altered. Italian American women authors have reworked the myth as 'a means of redefining both woman and culture'.³⁰ Therefore, they have carried out a crucial act that undoes the hierarchical structures organising society. Memory, as employed in the Italian American memoirs examined here, has been pivotal to journey back and revisit the grey areas of 'what was unknown when could not be known' and can only be 'acknowledged at a present time'.³¹

²⁷ Meyer Reinhold, *Classica Americana: The Greek and Roman Heritage in the United States* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984).

²⁸ Patrice D. Rankine, *Ulysses in Lack: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), p. 23.

²⁹ Rankine, p. 23.

³⁰ Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), p. 211.

³¹ Nicola King, *Memory, Narrative, Identity*, p. 9.

The cohesion of myth and memory in the books examined in this thesis has enabled the authors to make sense of past events that contributed to their condition of liminality. Thanks to the revision and rewriting of the myth of Persephone, Caperna Lloyd, Ragusa, and Clapps Herman have challenged the condition of liminality underpinning their 'identity on the threshold'.

Appendix

Interview with Susan Caperna Lloyd

Valentina: How did you first find out about the myth of Persephone?

Caperna Lloyd: I was the one who discovered the myth of Persephone in Sicily. All of these other people, I believe, did not have that idea until I started. I started going to a lot of Italian American conferences and I had written my book and done a film as well. So, for the record, I was the one to discover this and put it in print. I had been in the Procession for the first time in 1983 and I was fascinated with what I saw – which I eventually wrote about. I did not know specifically that the Demeter-Persephone myth actually existed so strongly in Sicily. Yes, in my studies of Greek mythology I had read that myth. But I was fascinated with the idea that the Madonna searching for the son, that the women told me she was doing and I saw her doing that and the idea that Christ was getting himself arrested and killed and causing his mother such sorrow. And so that theme fascinated me and that's why I launched into the project. The Madonna looking for a lost child, it just resonated with me. I suppose as a mother, I did have my first son at that point; that would have been a connecting point that would have been strong for me. I went home and my good friend Barbara Corrado Pope was also Sicilian American. I told her about this Madonna looking for the son and she said: 'You know, that sounds like the myth of Demeter and Persephone.' So leave it to the academics to think of things like that. I don't think that if she hadn't said that I would have thought of that connection. It's not that if you go to Sicily you see Demeter and Persephone all over the place. I mean, it's not broadcast. You have to go to the museums to see the artefacts

from the Greek Era. I just didn't know at that point that it was so strong. And so when Barbara brought that up that's when the project really started.

Valentina: In what way do you say that the Madonna looking for a lost child resonates with you?

Caperna Lloyd: Well, the obvious would be as a mother. I am a very deeply involved mother with my two sons. I think I've always been attracted to the Madonna and her son anyway; Pietà, whatever it is. I've been incredibly close with my two sons. And I could go on about that. I actually gave up a university teaching job that I worked so hard to get. It was a job in the fine arts department. Because after I had Sky, my first child, I didn't see how I could do both. Whether it is my Italian background of the nurturing, the mother, she stays at home, my mother stayed at home. Yes, I did push myself to get the degrees and all of that. But that I was going to be a big woman of the world? Oh no, I'm gonna be home with my boy. And that's what I did, and I developed my career at home through the years. Eventually I did teach again, but I developed all of my projects, and maybe I was better for it, by being a mother. So, maybe, that's why I'm so attached to the mother losing the son. But also, at the same time, when my younger son was there, with us [in Trapani during the Procession], I was starting to feel him moving away. I sensed him moving away from me. Maybe that's why I related to this idea of the Madonna searching for a son and being so in love and passionate about the son.

Valentina: Why do you think Italian American women writers, but also Italian American artists in general, have turned to the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their works?

Caperna Lloyd: Because of me? I found this! I found this myth for them in 1983. I don't think any of the other people that have brought it into their work quite saw that. There's been some work on the Black Madonna or the Black Virgin in the various Black Virgin sites, but nothing really that I know of had been said about Demeter and Persephone and I think, OK, so, whether it was really me or not, but I brought lots of groups of people over there, to go there and experience that. With Jean Houston, we brought 60 people over there in 1992. Women, all women. And you know, this is just... It got around and all of a sudden I noticed that everybody is into this Demeter and Persephone thing. You know, a lot. I really promoted the book and I have the film, don't forget, too. I had it all over the country a lot, through the late eighties and the nineties. When all these women saw it, it just resonated with them. OK, why? Because we are searching for lost parts of ourselves. I feel we are, especially as Italian American. Because we have very patriarchal fathers who, from the old country, kept us more or less inside; we want to break out of that and go into the underworld. To get out of the house and prescribed rules we were raised with, I was, Barbara was, and damn it, you know, it's been hard. And then also, if you're also an immigrant, you don't have the support group. I was raised in a very WASP-y town on the coast of Oregon, a Scandinavian fishing town, and so there's no support but you feel this sense that you're trapped and you want to break out. So the myth allows us to work. And it's not just physically breaking out into being able to walk a street at night. It's breaking out of the idea that we have rules we are supposed to obey as a mother, as a Madonna, and we can't be something else. And I'm even entrapped in that because I am even right now with sons in their late twenties and early thirties. I'm still a mother to them, struggling with go for who you are, what you really wanna do. Let them be, let them go. I mean,

it's a real danger to over-mother these two boys anyway. So this is just how I feel about why Italian American women are attracted to this myth. There's so much to say about it. It's frightening to go into the underworld, into the unknown. Because we haven't really been trained to do that. We are supposed to have our older brother escort us and be home by 10pm. All that kind of stuff that you grow up with traditional-minded parents and you're afraid to do it. As a Persephone you don't wanna do it to go away from home, but on the other hand, you do wanna.

Valentina: How has your understanding of the myth changed or developed throughout the writing of *No Pictures in my Grave*?

Caperna Lloyd: I think people think that 'I'm going to go into the underworld, this one time in my life and then everything is just gonna be great. And I'm gonna go down and there's this passage and it's gonna be terrible. And I'm gonna be saved and I'm gonna be resurrected and everything is great'. No! I find that I'm continuing to repeat the going down and coming back constantly in my life. I think there's probably key times when I'm doing it. There are these points in life where you have to make adjustments, and to me it has a lot to do with actually with my role as mother. First, the sons start to grow up. Then, they leave home. And then your parents die. My mother just died, last year. All these times then you're down in the underworld again. Experiencing loss again, over and over again. That's how I feel has changed. I feel that I'm still playing out the roles of Demeter and Persephone all the time. Right now I'm Persephone lost in the underworld, as a matter of fact, and I'm also Demeter because I've been reaped away from my sons and forced to a dark place also with my mother's death. I'm a child who has lost her mother. My mother and I were very close. And I'm also the mother, Demeter, I'm both. Both of my sons are back East, I have now fully recognized that

they are full adults that we just don't have the same relationship that we did before. They have to move on. We are very close. One is married. The other one is involved in a lot of different things. So, there's a feeling of loss there. And I'm the mother searching for them and I have to watch myself all the time that I back off. It's like Christ, and here's another Catholic metaphor, but when he meets Mary and she meets him, you know, on the way up to Calvary, right, on the stations of the cross and she's so distraught. She's like: 'My son, my son!' and he's like: 'Mother, I have this thing I have to do!' Maybe Jesus in the temple, the same thing when he was twelve: 'Mom, I have this thing I have to do.' But I so identify with the mothering thing that I really do, I find that I do, I feel that I do.

I think the Italian women have been stuck into the role of mothering too much because the boy-men are out there, in the world, with their affairs and all the stuff they do and the women are inside, traditionally. I mean it's changing a lot, but historically, you can't walk at night – surely I couldn't do that in Sicily without raising eyebrows. You're forced inside. And what are you gonna do when you're forced inside? You develop very strong bonds with your children. And you're not much of a wife to your man, except to tell him 'mangia!'

Italian is a feeling culture. Have you ever studied the Union of Personality types? Just listen to an opera. I've used the intermezzo in the documentary of my family.

Valentina: Do you employ the myth of Demeter and Persephone to claim a belonging to the Italian heritage? That is, could this myth be read as symbolic of the sense of *Italianità* in your work? And if so, how did the myth of Persephone help you bridge your Italian identity and your American identity?

Caperna Lloyd: It helps me bridge the Italian identity and the American identity because it has helped me break away from the circumscribed rules I've mentioned. I live here in the United States; I don't have to be a woman who stays at home with her children just because that's how I was raised to think. But, obviously, by personally experiencing this in Sicily and forcing myself out into the underworld which I wrote about in the book, physically doing that, got me into a place of self-assurance, not that I've been weak in my whole life. I've been quite an adventurous person because of my mother. But I would say that doing that book and doing what I did in the book and going to all places and taking all the chances. I think you have to physically do stuff. You can't just think and do therapy and talk about it. You have to physically move and do it. So doing that gave me the ability to know that I did not have to be a shrinking violet or a stay-home mother. I can do anything. And I have actually in my life now since then done a lot of pretty crazy things by myself. I went to Afghanistan during the war, for example. My older son was a marine in Afghanistan in 2005. It's this kinda thing, you know, that has made me really strong. I actually travelled over there as a journalist to find him and to do a story. I travelled around the country during the war. It's a book I'm actually working on, it's a side project. It's made me awfully tough – the whole experience with Demeter and Persephone, I mean. To just go by myself and do stuff. It was kinda scary, too. And I keep pushing myself all the time.

Valentina: At the end of the memoir you write: 'I had become the goddess I had sought.' Can you say something about your quest? What is it that you eventually found? How did that contribute to a renewal of your own self?

Caperna Lloyd: In the book I joined the world of men. It's not men really, but it's the outer world. Because, as you remember, in the book the women walk behind the

Madonna, in black, carrying candles, they were quiet about it, they don't have an important, strong role. Whereas, the men are carrying. And I am a strong person, I've always been strong and athletic. And to me that's the outer world that I've now been able to join: the world of action. It's the woman getting out of the harem and going out on the street, metaphor. And being accepted in doing it. 'Cause I had to really watch it that while going to Sicily and doing all that stuff I didn't come across as a 'puttana', a whore. That was the biggest problem. How do you do this? I really like to have a female identity that's a little more toward androgynous. I think one thing that women really do that's bad is go too much on being cute and sexy. Especially in a place like Sicily, you can't go around like that, it's ridiculous. I have to kinda find my male side and mix it together to achieve this. At least, that was my experience there. I had to do that. Maybe later on it will come a day when women can go walking around half-nude and no one will bat an eye. So I think I did a good job of playing that just right. And it is the person that I am anyway. I was raised that way, like I mentioned, pretty athletic, kind of tomboyish. So I've never been too much into super super sexy deal. So it worked for me eventually. But I've been in Sicily probably three times and I was trusted there, I made a lot of friends. D'you know what I mean? So they accepted me. I didn't just pop in there on a one-time visit and started to try and carry something. And I physically wanted to do it. It wasn't just symbolic like, 'Oh, I wanna walk with these men', I wanted to dance. I want that dance. (Which is now what I'm doing with my current project.)

Valentina: What about the renewal of your Self?

Caperna Lloyd: The whole idea of the circle. If you really make the journey with the people that you're with. That's incredibly important, I think, for you to be with the group; with the like-minded people. You are sharing in this journey that starts at a

certain point, the church of the purgatory, and it goes out. And you go through all day, you go through, from the light to darkness to the light again, if you physically do that together and you dance it, it's renewal. Why is it renewal? Why do we have ritual?

Valentina: Yes, this is one of the main questions you raise in your memoir, and it is the same question you ask in the documentary you made, *Between Two Worlds*.

Caperna Lloyd: Which is a circular pilgrimage in Japan. I guess it gets back to the Ouroboros and the symbol of the snake feeding on its own tail, which is the symbol of the medical profession. That's always been a symbol of regeneration. The circle. The idea that the snake actually feeds on its own tail, its own tails and regenerates. It is the Japanese Sumi-e. A Japanese Sumi artist can spend a lifetime trying to paint in one quick movement, a circle. What is it about the circle? It's wholeness. And the circle of life from death to life to death et cetera, it's all circular and I think if we just move in a circle, whether you're hiking around a town, or you're running a race around a track, the idea of the completion of the circle, I think, it's a physical sense of renewal. You've completed a circle, you've completed a journey and if you do it with your body then all the better.

Valentina: Like you say in the documentary of the Japanese, does journey really ever end?

Caperna Lloyd: Life is one big circle of movement from life to the end of our physical life, and death. But there are many circular journeys during the time we're here; and later too, when we do die. In terms of karma, if you believe in Hindu mythology.

Valentina: In the memoir, you identify yourself at times as a Persephone-figure and at times as a Demeter-figure. For instance, in the chapter 'Syracuse Revisited', you

identify yourself as Persephone in your act of screaming at the taxi driver who was driving you to an unknown destination. On the other hand, in the first chapter, 'Procession', you identify as Demeter while watching your son in the distance walking the *Ceto Ecce Homo* with the other *portatori*, the carriers. Do Demeter and Persephone embody different universes to you in terms of attitudes towards life? What is it that triggers your identification with one rather than the other at different stages of your life?

Caperna Lloyd: I think I've probably answered to this. I think I'm a lost child with my mother's death. At the same time, which happens about the time that your parents die, your children become full adults with their own life. And so I'm acting out, I'm both in those places. It's really weird. It's a weird feeling to have both of those go on at the same time.

Valentina: Have you ever felt like a Persephone-figure on the threshold in relation to your Italian American identity and the uncertainty or anxiety to cross that threshold?

Caperna Lloyd: I'm thinking about where I am right now. I see myself in regards to my mother as being taken away from her. And I'm kinda in the underworld about that. And I'm afraid. Can I truly get out of this? There's been a very interesting thing with my mother through my whole life, starting as a young child, in the fishing village. I would lay awake at night, I'd be five years old, and I'd be counting the years she had left to live. And I've always done that. I was so terribly afraid, for some reason, of losing her, or that she might die, and I often think that it might have been because of the attic we lived in – which is in my documentary film, *The Baggage*. I remember my parents' door was always closed. And that's because my father always wanted sex. He was a sex maniac from what my mother told me. And their door would be closed at

night, and I would lay there, in the bed, and I could look down the hallway and their door was closed, and at the end of the hallway was the attic door. Scary! This is an old house. I had been in that attic, and it was creepy. And no one hardly went in there. And I really believe that that's what started my anxiety about losing my mother. And no-one was there to protect me 'cause I saw ghosts coming out of the attic toward me. And their door was shut. That's why when I raised my boys I never did anything like that. Because I started this obsessive compulsive behaviour, 'cause I was so worried about my mother, and counting the days that she had left to live. And I'm Persephone right now 'cause she died and the years did run out. And, am I gonna be OK? And I'm OK, I'm OK. That's the closest I can answer to that question is how I relate to Persephone right now. But I also relate to Demeter looking for the son; the sons. Like my son called me last night and I flew to DC. I can't believe I did that.

Valentina: In Italian American literature, it has been noticed how the role of grandparents is pivotal in the passing down of Italian traditions and identity. Your memoir seems to be a perfect example of this, since its narrative is triggered by your desire to understand the role and the life of your grandmother Carolina in relation to your Italian heritage. Could you, please, tell me something about your relationship with Carolina before you travelled to Italy and how this relationship changed after the travel?

Caperna Lloyd: Carolina would come out by train from New Jersey to Oregon to visit us and I always loved her so much. She was very strong, but she also cried a lot. She never saw her mother again when she left Italy in 1922. She was very strong, very big, I wrote about her in the book. But, something that really didn't go into the book, which now is going into the new project, is how she would dance for me. She was always talking about her own mother, Sofia, who, she said, was a 'zingana'. This is all coming

into my new book 'cause I believe I have some gypsy to me and this is so exciting. 'Cause she would talk about Sofia, the mother she never saw again, and she would dance for me. And this dancing transformed her sadness and she would dance out this very powerful scary thing that I think was kind of a flamenco like her mother danced. She would resolve her pain and sorrow. A very liberating thing and she would talk about her mother and she would give me pictures of her mother, which I still have, with great huge gypsy earrings and all these scarves. So I'm now pursuing, having Carolina told me these stories about her in terms of my current project. On the other hand, Carolina did teach a lot of superstitious stuff. So, you want to know how did she affect me? You see, I wish I had talked to her much more, but I was so young. And she lived back east, in New Jersey.

Valentina: Did you speak in English?

Caperna Lloyd: Yes, although her English was very broken. But it was OK. But I do remember the stories about her mother. And another big thing was the food, and another big thing would be her religiosity: she prayed a lot and she also, I think, influenced me to have some Catholic or not – however you wanna call it. She would pass through the door four times in and out. She would do stuff like that. I don't know, you would call it obsessive-compulsive? Superstitious? She did a lot of that kind of thing and I picked up a lot of those kind of habits.

Valentina: In what circumstances would she perform those kinds of superstitious rituals?

Caperna Lloyd: I think when she was worried about things. Like, when she would come and stay with us. She would come and stay for quite a long period of time, and she would worry so much. I had two sisters and a brother. And if they didn't return

home at the right time from school, or my father wasn't home – her son, my father – from work. Yeah, she would worry about a lot of stuff like that.

Valentina: Did your journey to Sicily help you to understand Carolina better?

Caperna Lloyd: Oh, yeah! I think that I was making the step outside for her. She lived under prescribed rules, especially in the United States as an immigrant without the support of a community of Italian Americans around her because they lived in a town in New Jersey where there were no Italians – a lot like my dad took us to. So, I think she had a lot of fear of getting out – even though she was a big woman. But you have to go really careful when you're an immigrant, you know. My dad would always say: 'Boy, if you screw up in America, you might have to go home; they'll ship you back to Italy.' He talked about that all the time. They have a lot of fear of that, you know, the older generation. Carolina was living like that too. But I sensed her strength and I think in the old country she probably was able to be more who she was, but here no, and I was able to make the move for her in my generation.

Valentina: The importance of grandparents in your personal quest for roots is a recurring theme in your work. You once told me you were planning to travel to France and Spain to look into your great grandmother's past and to better understand her influence in your life. Am I right? Could you, please, tell me something about this new project of yours?

Caperna Lloyd: So, this new project, which I kind of got into because my sister died and because she was a Flamenco dancer. She was a great flamenco dancer. It's crazy, but I never really got to talk much to her about that. But she did say: 'You know, our great grandmother was a dancer. She was a gypsy. Don't you remember?' Well, I did

remember Carolina telling me all of this stuff. Well, Angela studied flamenco. When Angela died (and both of my sisters have died tragically in their forties, it's been horrible, and I only have a brother left right now), I promised Angela I would go to Spain with her and we would study flamenco because she wanted me to do that and it would give her something to do and we were already grieving the death of our other sister, back in the nineties. That's a terrible story. She died of pneumonia, and no one knows why. Anyway, I was on my way down to Los Angeles to help Angela, see her and I was bringing her an antique flamenco doll, as a Christmas present, and she died the night before I got there. And she's now buried in Oregon with her flamenco doll in her arms, in the casket and I decided to fulfil my promise to her to go to Spain to study flamenco. And I did it by myself, I went over there, and little did I know that flamenco dance, the dance of the Roma, is a dance of sorrow, because of their past history, it gave me a way to express my loss. So I'm kind of a Demeter losing again, losing a sister, losing a bond. And I have a lot I'm processing through this movement. It's the same thing as the Procession. It really is. You're moving through the pain and sorrow of Good Friday, Persephone, Demeter, they're moving through the underworld and coming back again. And I'm doing it now through this, through flamenco.

Valentina: In *The Dream Book*, Helen Barolini argues that in the Italian imagination the idea of the role of women was influenced by the cult of the Madonna. Andrew Rolle, who contributed to the understanding of Italian Americans from a psychological perspective, argues that: 'The Madonna had been a mother but scarcely a wife.' Helen Barolini adds to it that Italian American women were indeed reduced to playing the role of *mater dolorosa*, sorrowful mother. In both the memoir and *The Baggage* you refer to your grandmother Carolina as a long-suffering Madonna, a sorrowful mother. But you

also say something similar to Rolle and Barolini when in the book you write: ‘I rarely saw the passion of the Sicilian women. Were they hiding it somewhere? What had they done with it? As with Carolina, had it gone into the spaghetti pot, the Virgin Mary, or into worry about their sons?’ Could you please explain this a bit further?

Caperna Lloyd: I’ve probably hit on that. The first thing, I would say, well, the Madonna had been a mother but scarcely a wife. That’s really interesting, I didn’t know that she had said that. She’s a mother to the boy-man, to the boy-husband. As far as the mother, had been a mother but scarcely a wife, I mean it has to do with Catholicism, the cult of the Madonna, where does that come from? I mean, I think the cult of the Madonna has been created by these Latin cultures. And I think it must have grown in a kind of synthesis with each other; the idea of the Madonna and then you have these Latin cultures with the role of women that’s sort of an Arab-like role, it kinda mixed together to create this mother, not sexual object: i.e. wife. But you are a mother. That’s the proper role of women. I think that’s throughout the Mediterranean really. If you’re sexual you’re more on the prostitute kinda side of thing. So the real role is to be a mother. And it’s supported by the Catholic Church of course.

Valentina: Opposed to the image of the *Madonna Addolorata*, there is the Black Madonna you discovered in Tindari, near Messina. The Sorrowful Madonna, symbolic of the pain, and the Black Madonna who, instead, as you write, exudes ‘power and self-assurance’, both reminded you of Carolina. These two Madonnas seem to portray opposing values; nonetheless you associate them both with your grandmother and with Italian migrant women at large. Like Persephone embodies both death and life, Carolina is able to live a life that conjugates the pain for the loss of her life in the Old World and her new life in America. You also argue your grandmother forgot to possess the ‘power

of the Black Madonna' once she arrived in America. What do you think caused this loss of memory?

Caperna Lloyd: If you look at these Black Madonnas and Black Virgins, the black goes back to the ancient fertility deities, pre-Christian. And there's a sexual aspect. So, in regards to the question, opposing values, I think the black brings up more of the aspect of the immiscibility to be sexual, as well as being a nurturing, mothering being. And so, I guess, in regards to the question, the Black Madonna exudes power and self-assurance. They both remind me of Carolina. The Madonna *Addolorata* in Trapani is a dark Madonna, so she's not that different from the Tindari. She's considered to be because she's so outside too and so mysterious – like the Tindari's Madonna and other Black Madonnas – she is like them in that she is so uniquely out there and strong and upright at the end of the Procession. The son is dead and she is standing. There's a symbolization right there. She's part of the Black Madonna cult, I believe. The Tindari Madonna came from the East.

Valentina: So, the first time you saw the Madonna of Sorrows, this Madonna did not strike you because she was dark but because of her pain and sorrowful expression which you could relate to Carolina. When you saw the Black Madonna of Tindari, on the other hand, this one struck you because she exuded self-assurance and strength.

Caperna Lloyd: Oh, I see. Yes, absolutely. I grew within the telling of the story to get beyond Carolina's pain and suffering. And that was the relationship to my grandmother. To get beyond that, to see that's not all the story on her. Yes, she is suffering; yes, you can suffer, but you can emerge victorious, and go back into that church and wait a whole other year to come out and look for your son again. I think that I saw her to be

different than I had originally seen her to be, as suffering. Which I guess I did, at first, in Sicily. Carolina, when she would dance, I think that she got out of the pain and the sorrow I always saw her portraying when she would dance about the story of her mother. And that was how she released that sorrow and pain. So there were two parts to her too, I guess. It's a really interesting question. What you say here that I argue that grandmother forgot to possess the power of the Black Madonna once arrived in America and what caused this? Well, I think it's the lack of support. It's even worse when you're an immigrant, and she lacked the support of the Italian American women. In the book, when I go in the harem, and I sit around with those women, and they're singing those songs, they had such great support with each other. They're inside, but they're really taking power in the way they're singing about their men and making fun of them and that was great. My grandmother would have never been able to do it 'cause she had no support there in the Anglo town.

Valentina: In her book, *Nonfiction Book Proposals Anybody Can Write*, Elizabeth Lyon explains that your memoir was initially a slightly different project titled *Return to the Mother: A Holy Week Journey. No Pictures in my Grave* was born after you reworked the previous version and decided to target it for an anthropology audience. Is this correct? If so, could you please tell me what the main changes you applied were and why you decided to apply them?

Caperna Lloyd: I still like the title 'return to the mother'. But that was one-sided in my opinion. But it's OK to return to the mother, I think. Maybe 'return to the self' would be a better word, not that I would use it, but, you know what I'm saying? Truth is that the title got changed because of the publishers, in part, and I think it was a period when... But also because of the story of my dad – which I tell at the very beginning of the book

– where he had the pic of him and my brother in his wallet and he'd gone out to his mother's funeral in New Jersey and he'd come back and he was crying: 'Look, Susan, I took the pictures in my wallet of Gary and me and I put them on her body in the coffin so that she will protect Gary and I.' I was so upset to think that he didn't even carry pictures of his daughters in his wallet. Let alone think to put them on her body. He said: 'Well, girls, you won't need protecting.' Well, both of my sisters definitely needed protecting and they didn't get it and they died. And I'm pissed about that. And I think I was really starting to... that's why I changed the title because he had told that story and I wanted to be strong enough that I'm never gonna ask my sons, I don't want them to need me and I don't wanna need them that much.

Valentina: In the first version of your project, the idea of a 'return to the mother' was clearly stated in the title. On the other hand, in the final version, this 'return to the mother', the quest for roots, is a journey that the readers experience together with the protagonist of the story. Do you think that the memoir is the privileged means to accomplish this kind of journey?

Caperna Lloyd: Everything I do is documentary or memoir style, so I don't really know how to do fiction. I can't do it. It'd be foreign to me.

Valentina: You are also a photographer and a film director. Why did you choose to write a travel memoir to tell your story?

Caperna Lloyd: I like writing about myself at different passages as a way of figuring out my life. I mean, anything I've written is always, the one I'm doing now on the Roma and the flamenco, is figuring out my life. With the Sicily book, I was going to just write a magazine article, which I did. When I came back from the Procession the

first time. And because the Procession was so interesting, you know, and exciting, so that actually is chapter one of the book. But then I came back and I had it as a part of a larger study, of holy week rituals, which is another project of mine that I'm also working on. So, that's how I saw that book fitting into anything. So, they said: 'Could you expand the first chapter you did on this Trapani deal?' And this all happened at a time when I had just finished the documentary about Sicily and I had that kinda funny nervous system breakdown, that I talk about in the book. And here's this publisher wanting me to expand on it and then they might take it. So I said, you know what, I'm going back to Sicily and look for Demeter, 'cause now I knew the story of the myth and everything.

You write a little about something that's happened, and you're on a journey. And then you write it, you read it, and then you go like, 'Now I know what I need to do next.' I knew that that was just the beginning over there the first time in Sicily. The writing is now pushing me, is telling me to go back there. The writing was a way for me to deal with the nervous breakdown that I was having. I've always had a tendency toward a little bit of anxiety. My dad had it, and, at this particular time, I was in a kinda fragile state. Demeter and Persephone helped me. They brought me out there, on the island. They forced me to go on a physical journey. And after I did it, then I had a book; I had a story, a personal story.

Valentina: From a broader point of view, what is your understanding of memoir and its relevance today?

Caperna Lloyd: Well, everybody's writing memoirs. I wonder about it. I do think, more and more, people are feeling confused. Family is broken up, people are moving

away, getting cancer. There's a lot of troubles and I think that people are finding that writing, it helps some, and they sincerely would like to take out their story and share it. It is cathartic. And I think, also, nowadays everybody is writing everything. Everybody's a writer. I think also people wanna feel their life matters in this post-modern world. They want to feel that they made some kind of mark while they were here on this earth.

Valentina: *No Pictures in my Grave* presents a circular structure which opens and closes with the description of the procession devoted to the Madonna in Trapani, Sicily. In 'Faith/Fede – Plenty to Confess', Mary Jo Bona links your structural choice to the fact that, as anthropologist Kay Turner has argued, usually, the processions devoted to the Madonna present a circular pattern themselves. Turner says that the Madonna is historically connected to fertility rites and therefore argues that: 'in a model procession dedicated to Mary, the movement must inevitably take place in a circular [...] route because such processions are based on that type of agricultural-fertility ceremony which simultaneously imitates the circular patterned movement of the heavens, the progress of sowing to reaping to sowing again, and the cyclic process of women's menstrual-fertile period.' Do you agree with this explanation or is there another reason for the structure you designed for the memoir?

Caperna Lloyd: I would definitely agree with that. It all goes back to the fertility rituals and the circularity of the heavens and sowing cycle and menstrual cycle. I never really thought of that but I don't think I was consciously thinking 'oh, I'm gonna make this book in a circle or the journey is a circle' so much, but it turned out to be a circle. As I looked at it later after the experience I was home writing and I could see the circularity more obviously.

I did know that I wanted to begin and end the book with the opening of the Procession, do all this stuff, circle the island, and then at end go back to the Procession in a new way.

Valentina: In your memoir, you have inserted pictures from your travel in Sicily. One of the pictures included in the book is also included in your documentary, *The Baggage*. I am referring to the picture of a mosaic with missing pieces and of a broken angel next to the mosaic in the chapter 'In the Harem'. These are not the only images which portray broken and/or chipped objects and that you decided to include in the book. Are these representative of the post-modern fragmentation of the self you experienced? What is your relationship to the images you chose to accompany the writing of your story?

Caperna Lloyd: Definitely post-modern, broken, truncated imagery is all what I am about. A lot of my imagery is all like this, not just for this. Broken things, uh, half of a Christ on the cross. All those kind of things fascinate me. I was in Nicaragua and brought back some Santos, and they were all crosses with one hand on the cross. And there's a picture like that in the book. Why do I love that? A lot of my imagery is like that. Well, there's mystery when you have an image like that. I like to make pictures that don't answer all questions. And I want to make people wonder about it. And I have to say that, I have to say that I have mixed feelings about Catholicism and Christ on a cross and that has affected us as kids with this poor, sad, sorrowing Christ. And I guess I'm trying to get Christ off the cross. Or tear the arm off that angel. You know that book about the holy week with all the different holy weeks and it's called the day they crucified Lucy Race and she's a Filipino healer who's nailed to a cross every Good Friday but leaves and she does it to get power and she goes into an ecstatic trance, it's

like a Native American sun dance. There's no blood even though there are five different stainless nails in her hands and feet. It's a totally different thing. It's power. She's dark. She's a dark Madonna, in my opinion. It's a different concept than the Christ we have grown up with. But I think I'm trying to tear him off the cross. You can easily say that. Something broken in myself that I'm trying to put back together. [You want people to question, but you also question yourself] Yeah, I think that down deep the broken thing, the broken angel, the broken Christ, is a metaphor for my, I don't know if I want to say my 'broken self', but I guess it's the lost parts of myself – as I say at the end of the book. Now, how do we reconcile that with taking Christ off the cross? Well, maybe I wanna put some nails there besides that sorrowing Christ.

Valentina: Another interesting picture is the one in the chapter 'Syracuse Revisited'. This is the picture of the *Santoni*, bas-reliefs of Demeter at Palazzolo. In the caption describing this picture you write: 'Like Sicily's women, Demeter spends a life inside.' Can you say something about this statement and your choice to use the myth to interpret the Sicilian community in terms of gender?

Caperna Lloyd: It was a 'harem culture'. You know, the courtyards are in the centre. And they're not sitting on the front porch, like we do here, in the United States. So, in that *Santoni*, Demeter was actually being protected in those little houses, but I think, what I'm getting at here is that the myth is hidden. The myth that a woman can go out there like Demeter and retrieve some lost soul, her lost daughter, or a lost part of herself. That myth is hidden from the women who are hidden.

Valentina: What is the link between myth and memory in your memoir?

Caperna Lloyd: We live in myth. We're all playing out myth. No matter what we do: the myth of the perfect marriage, the myth of motherhood, the myth of the American dream. Whatever myth. But we're walking through these myths but we don't know why we are. We are taking them into our consciousness. We're just kinda blindly living out these myths. I think what's really important for the old myths is that there are types that are repeated over and over again in so many different mythologies that these are stories that we are all familiar with from time immemorial as part of the human condition. But if you find a myth in the old world that you can actually relate to your life and these myths are acted out all the time in our world's cultures still, you know, they are disappearing. But if you can go do it and go dance with those people, and hear their stories and go on the Procession, you can take your own mythic life that you are not so conscious of and now it can tell you what the heck you're doing in your life. If you can hook up with these folk cultures where people are singing, dancing, moving and telling their mythic stories, then you get it for your whole life and then you can go on.

Valentina: How do you consider yourself? Italian? American? Italian American?

Caperna Lloyd: It depends. I really like it although it is just one part of me. There is another part that's 'Susan Lloyd'. I work on projects that are kinda different. Such as a film I did in Mexico, about the Mexican revolution, Emiliano Zapata, *The Last Zapatista*, about the Mexican revolution of 1910–1920 and that kinda gets into politics and because I do go through life in the United States as Susan Lloyd, it depends. It depends on whether you're talking about me professionally or not. I feel like I live a double life, in a way, because I was raised here in Oregon as an Italian American. I often think of moving to Italy or Spain too. Or to where there is Italian American culture. I'm not sure I really want to do that or do I need to do that, but I could do that.

So I have an identity as Susan Caperna Lloyd because to keep in touch with my Italian background is important to me. I go to Italian American Historical Association conferences, hook up with people, you know, that I know most of them are in the academic world and it feels really good to be with them. So if I do any work that is Latin-ish/Italian, I use the Caperna because I think it gives me credibility. I think Susan Lloyd sounds like a very WASP name and I'm very proud of the Italian part of me. But on the other hand, for my film in Mexico, I just used Susan Lloyd. I didn't use Caperna 'cause I wasn't talking to an Italian audience. So, I kinda use them both.

Valentina: How do you position in relation to the question of 'hyphenate or not to hyphenate' the Italian American binomial?

Caperna Lloyd: Yeah, I know. Fred Gardaphé and Tamburri have written about that. I don't hyphenate and never have.

Valentina: Do you think you will work with the myth of Persephone again in the future?

Caperna Lloyd: Yes, I will. I have been researching about Kali as related to Persephone; as another underworld and very dark deity. However, I'd prefer not to disclose too many details. But yes, definitely; I will go back to the myth.

Interview with Kym Ragusa

Valentina: Why do you think Italian American women writers, but also Italian American artists in general, have turned to the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their works?

Kym Ragusa: The myth of Demeter and Persephone is so rich because it contains so many themes that are significant to women: motherhood, daughterhood, rape, patriarchy vs matriarchy, the search for independence and the longing for connection. It becomes specifically meaningful for Italian American women artists and writers because the story is set in Sicily, it comes from the very ground our ancestors walked, comes from some kind of collective unconscious that developed in that landscape.

Valentina: In the memoir, you explain that the myth of Persephone was given to you as a gift from Miriam, your African American grandmother. The version of the myth that Miriam used to tell you was the Homeric one. By the end of the book, however, you express your preference for the Ovidian version, as this offers an empowering portrayal of Persephone, who can choose her fate, rather than being a victim. How did you first find out about the Ovidian version?

Kym Ragusa: That's precisely it - it was valuable to me because of that shift from victim to one who chooses, even in circumstances that are still oppressive. It offered a window, a glimpse of freedom even within the strictures of a male-dominated, violently restrictive world.

Valentina: Gianbattista Vico said that *'fantasy is dilated or composed memory'*. Do you agree? And what is the boundary then between fantasy and memory in your writing experience?

What is the link between myth and memory in your memoir?

Kym Ragusa: In my memoir, myth, fantasy, and memory are facets of one another, complements to one another. We create myth out of fragments of stories that we need for survival, for nourishment. We have little memory, of an event, an ancestor, so we imagine, we embellish. My great-grandmother Louisa was for me a mythic character - though I only know a little about her life, I imagined her as a powerful matriarch, a magical healer linked to generations of women like her back into the time of the myths themselves. I needed her to be larger than life in order to create a space for myself in my family's narrative - she, the healer, beyond the realities of racism of the times, was able to bring me into the fold. My portrayal of Miriam, on the other hand, came from a deep desire to remember her as clearly as possible, to memorialize her. Fantasy gives color and texture to both myth and memory. How do we make real what we don't know directly? We create characters, images. Memory is so often unreliable, especially when it is contested within a family where people have competing agendas or are deep in denial. How do you know what is true? For me, memoir is about what is true to the experience of the writer. It is not reportage.

Valentina: What does Italy mean to you? Do you feel a strong connection with the country?

Kym Ragusa: Italy waxes and wanes in importance to me. After a number of years in deep exploration of my Italian roots, with much time spent traveling in Italy, I pulled back. There was no single reason for this, other than that I realized I wasn't Italian, I'm

Italian American among other things. There were cultural and linguistic divides I felt I couldn't cross, and didn't need to. However, I'm coming back to Italy in a new way now, because I have spent the last few years uncovering the Jewish roots of my Italian family. This is deeply moving to me, and I'm reading a lot about the history of the Jews in Italy, the migration of Jews from Sicily into the mountain towns of Calabria during the Inquisition, and the maintenance of crypto-Jewish cultural traditions into the present day. I hope to return sometime soon to do more research.

Valentina: How did your journey in Sicily and your visit to the Arab neighbourhood of La Kalsa, in Palermo, affect your personal journey of self-discovery and process of identity construction?

Kym Ragusa: This feels so far away now, since it was a long time ago that I went to that neighborhood and had the feelings I did. I can say that it was an affirmation of the mixed and multiple history and ethnicity of Sicily that was currently being reflected by the presence of newer immigrants of color. That was affirming to me as a person of color of Sicilian descent. But I think I may have idealized that moment. Yes, there was familiarity among the youth playing soccer in the community that day, but then and now there have been horrible instances of racist violence and structural discrimination that affect the everyday realities of African, Asian, and Muslim immigrants in Italy.

Valentina: In a recent interview with Professor Margherita Ganeri, Helen Barolini said: *'Time changes. I think: Italian Americans; ok. It is true. We had that period and brought into light people who were unknown. Now that we do know these people we have to move on. We have to belong to the greatest literature, which is the American one. ... I think that today we have overcome that period in which it was important to talk about immigration and assimilation. These issues were crucial to our great-*

grandparents' generation. But I don't believe these are crucial today, or connected to what we do now. Our goal has to be broader today.' What is your position toward the American literary canon and the status quo of Italian American literature?

Kym Ragusa: I'm not sure I can answer this. I don't know if any writer can be prescriptive about what other writers should be writing about. As long as immigration is a reality for people, it will remain an important subject to explore in literature. Perhaps changes in perspective are useful, writing about Italian immigration in ways that acknowledge other immigrant histories.

Valentina: If we look at the database of Italian American women authors available on the internet, we can see that your name is on the list <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Italian-American_women_writers>. On the other hand, if we look at the list for African American women authors, updated on April 2014, your name is not there <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:African-American_women_writers>. Why is that?

Kym Ragusa: I really don't know!

Valentina: In your video *fuori/outside*, there is an initial scene in which Gilda, your Italian American grandmother, is sitting at the kitchen table and you are filming her from outside a big window. She is aware of your presence and that you are using a camera. Gilda seems to be at ease, even amused by it. However, the audience has the feeling that you are spying on the inside of the house; there is a sense of discomfort we can perceive, possibly recreated through the silence (in fact you did not put any music or sound in the background). Also, Gilda's image blurs and then we can glimpse your own image reflecting on the window pane through which you are looking at Gilda and filming her in her house. Interestingly, this reflected image of yours conveys the idea of

you actually being inside the house. It also seems that the image is looking back, not at us, but at you (perhaps even challenging you). What or who were you trying to capture in that footage?

Kym Ragusa: I was trying to capture everything you describe - being both inside and outside, the feeling of being an interloper, a spy, but also at home.

Valentina: One could say that the writing of *The Skin Between Us*, published in 2006, is a way for you to come to terms with your hybridity. A written record to reply to the questions you put in italics in the first chapter: *What are you? Where are you from?* Seven years later, in 2013, you write the foreword to *Olive Grrrls*, an anthology that, collecting works by Italian American women writers, explores questions of identity through a feminist perspective. In the Foreword, you say that a question like ‘*What are you?*’ never stops being asked, ‘*not even in 2013. Not even in a country with a biracial African American president. Not even with people of color beginning to outnumber whites in cities and communities throughout North America*’. How has your understanding of this question developed or changed, if it has, through your writing?

Kym Ragusa: I'm mostly thinking of the question of hybridity in relation to my daughter, who is now three. She is Italian American, African American, Indian, and Australian. She is also Jewish (an identity I now claim), with Scottish, German, Chinese, and Native American ancestry. Wow! What do you do with all that? Probably to most people she looks white. Probably half the kids in her school are mixed in some way. What will her experience of hybridity be? How will she see herself? I'm trying not to project my own history, fears, insecurities, and questions onto her, to see how her experience of herself unfolds and help her through as best I can. And over time, to teach her about racism in ways that will be developmentally appropriate.

Valentina: In *Writing as a Way of Healing*, Louise Desalvo argues that ‘*it’s not what you produce as you write that matters. It’s who you become as you write that matters*’. How did the writing process change you? Who have you become? Were you expecting to become anyone different?

Kym Ragusa: Louise's book, *Writing As A Way of Healing*, has remained foundational for me as a writer and a teacher. And I think the person I became through the writing of my memoir is a teacher. I thought I'd become some kind of official writer, writing and publishing consistently, and that's not who I am. I've put my energy into teaching, which I love, which feels like more of a calling than the writing - or maybe they can't be separated. I also thought my identity questions would be resolved, and that the pain of my past would be purged. But identity is an ongoing, unfolding process, and I have found new ways to name, and grow from, the pain.

Valentina: Who did you have in mind as a possible audience when you wrote your book?

Kym Ragusa: I was imagining Italian Americans, African Americans, and especially mixed-race readers. Young adults as well as adults.

Valentina: How did you proceed, technically, to write your memoir? Did you start from a particular memory? A picture?

Kym Ragusa: I'm sorry - I wish I remembered what my process was, but I don't. I wrote with photographs as lot - that was one of the aesthetic and formal choices I made. One reviewer said I relied too much on photos to tell the story, but that was the point.

Valentina: Why did you choose to organise your memoir around a circular structure?

Kym Ragusa: Memory is circular. Questions of belonging, of home, of ancestry, feel circular to me - we keep coming back to them.

Valentina: In *The Last Gift of Time*, Carolyn Heilbrun writes that 'women catch courage from the women whose lives and writings they read'. Who gave you the courage to write your memoir? Do you have any particular female author that inspired your work?

Kym Ragusa: Edvige Giunta first and foremost. Louise DeSalvo. And writers I admired at the time (and still do): Sonia Sanchez, Audre Lorde, Joy Harjo, Helene Cixous, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Carole Maso.

Valentina: Do you think you will work with the myth of Persephone again in the future or with any other myth?

Kym Ragusa: It would be interesting to come back to the myth of Persephone and Demeter now that I am a mother. For now I feel too raw, too vulnerable, to explore that story in relation to my experience of being a mother to my daughter. Maybe someday.

Valentina: What have you been working on lately?

Kym Ragusa: I've been working on a number of essays, one recently published in *Personal Effects*, Edvige Giunta and Nancy Caronia's anthology of writings on the work and legacy of Louise DeSalvo. And beginning an exploration of my pull toward Judaism which might be my next book.

Interview with Joanna Clapps Herman

Valentina: How did you first find out about the myth of Demeter and Persephone?

Joanna Clapps Herman: You know, I was a reader as a child. I loved more than anything to go to the library. But reading was the other thing I loved. I read constantly, so much so that my mother was always yelling at me: ‘Put that book down and come and help me!’ and I would climb up to a tree with my books so I can hide and she couldn’t find me through the leaves. So, I know that I have many and many books of folktales and myths, so it’s very likely that it’s the first time I heard about it or read it but I know distinctly when it registered in my adult consciousness: I was a teacher, I was a librarian for little children at a private school. So, I have this little cart on wheels filled with books and I would go from room to room and read to the children. And I loved it and I used to make up stories too. Now I understand it’s all part of my writing life. But at the time I was just a young woman in one of her early jobs and I love books and I love children and I love teaching and I was just ‘Oh, good! I’ll do this!’ and one day, I was in a 4th grade year class, so that’s about 9 years old, and I was reading them the myth of Persephone and Demeter. And I was reading it with great *gravitas*; just slowly and beautiful. We were sitting in a circle, you know, and I could tell that the story was really, powerfully impacting them. And so I think that even made me read it with greater and greater seriousness and at the end, when the myth said: ‘and so that is why...’ you know, once we went through the whole cycle, ‘...and that is why we understand that when you plant the seeds in the winter and wait for them to come up the next year, that is what the story is about’ and the whole room went like ‘ooooohhhhhh’.

There was like this moment of 'ah ah'. The magic of the myth connecting to the reality of the agricultural cycle and the deep poetic truth of it. And my response in conveying it to them impacted me just as much as I impacted them. And that impacted me so profoundly, and they said: 'Oh! How we wish we could believe that!' It was just like, you know, if I was somebody who cried easily I would have cried instantly. It was that powerful, emotionally. And that day, or a few days later, I was talking to my boyfriend and I was telling him how powerful, and how powerful that remark was, 'How I wish I could believe something like that!' The story was just a simplified version for young people, you know, it wasn't Hesiod, for example, or even Robert Graves. But it was an elegant telling. It wasn't silly or a trivial telling of it either. But that summary: 'And that's why the Greek people believe' whatever it was. And then I said: 'And that child said this thing' and he said: 'Well, that's what you believe, Jo!' and I said: 'What do you mean?' and he said: 'Well, that's the story of the cycle of the Christian myth; it's the same story of the burial of Christ and the resurrection' and I was like 'Oh my God!' At that moment, Valentina, although I was not deeply involved in the church anymore, I had that, I had been a passionate church believer, so I felt a thrill go through me and great joy that I had had the privilege to truly believe in a living myth like that. And I had had the privilege of partaking in that in the way that these lovely, relatively upper-class kids, could never have had. You know, their parents were wonderful families! They tended to have money, they tend to be artistic, you know, movies, star children, writers, and directors. So they were a rather elite class, but pretty secular in general. And all the mythical stuff had never been imparted to them. And that I had had that privilege of living inside the myth and it meant so much to me. And that moment of recognition I will never forget it, I will never forget where I was. I was walking along

the edge of Washington Square Park and I will never forget it and that's how powerful a moment of recognition it was. And I just was so grateful, so very grateful. When I was reading it to those children it was a familiar myth. I'm sure I had read it many times, 'cause I was one of those kids. I would read those stories over and over and over again. But I realized in that moment that that myth belonged to me in a completely different way and there was no question in my mind, at that time, that that god was female. It was like it was as if, I mean, there are many many things I love about the church, but I do not like the fact, now, today that Mary is not considered divine. Excuse me? We can pray to her, she's so important to the Pope, but no no no, we can't call her divine! You know, that bothers me 'cause it's so classically out of that patriarchal culture that took all the original matriarchal myths and buried them and repressed them. So, another story that I am extremely involved in, you know the story of Anna and Joachim, Mary's parents? This is another myth cycle that is extremely important to me. I waited to go to Padua for 20 years because I had seen that Giotto had the whole cycle of Mary up on the top layer of the painting. This is another important story about the mother and the daughter. And it is important to me that the church has pushed all this stuff aside. Another image that got lost is the spinning. There is a tiny beautiful Byzantine cupola church in Palermo, you know, there is Mary over the arch. What is she doing? Well, she is spinning! That's another image that got lost: the spinning myth. Spinning, at least among the Greeks, it was a very symbol of a woman's status. For a woman to be good and righteous she had to be a good spinner. So, the truths of these myths, they're so powerful to me, that when I came upon the Demeter and Persephone myth, I felt like I had found the truth about my culture and my life and my understanding of myself. So, at that moment all I recognized was its poetic power and

my own gratitude for having been allowed to live truly within this myth, a version of this myth. And now this story was just opening the door to my own past. Now, subsequently, what happened is one day I read a book review that said: ‘The myths we love the most tell us a great deal about ourselves. For example, if you are someone who loves the Demeter and Persephone myth, you are somebody who really identifies with the earth mother sense of things: family, children, home, all that is incredibly important to you.’ Well, that’s what my life is about, my life was exactly like that, it was like ‘Oh my God! No wonder I’m so drawn to this!’ It’s so strong for me.

Valentina: Why do you think Italian American women writers, but also artists in general, have turned to the myth of Demeter and Persephone in their works?

Clapps Herman: I think it does have the universal truth in it. First of all, it’s a reflection of the agricultural cycle, which has been... I mean, when was the agricultural cycle invented? I just read this. Thirty thousand or forty thousand years ago? We can find out. Anyway, whenever agriculture was invented, that’s the sea change in us as a species. You know, that’s when we go from being pastoral and wanderers to being able to begin to really create a civilization. And that is when we begin to write. Right? The writing comes very soon after we discover agriculture. We’re one and the same because we know that the cuneiform tablets, the original cuneiform tablets, were records of what had been harvested. That’s what they were, records, they were inventory. So, to me, writing and civilization and agricultural stories – and this is a story of agriculture – they all go together. But then, of course, I really, as a feminist, and I was brought up in a very patriarchal culture, and frankly, I think that there are many beautiful things in a patriarchal culture. I am not somebody who dismisses the patriarchal culture as only bad at all. I think the idea of the hero, you know I love Homer, and the *Odyssey* and the

Iliad, and, by the way, I also love *The Godfather* and I think it's directly connected. I think, for example, those male figures are very beautiful. The idea that for the ideal of the community that they will sacrifice, basically they know that they have to put at risk their lives and basically they all end up in tragic death, all of them, for the greater good of the community and for glory and reputation and all of that stuff and, as I highlighted in the whole first chapter of the book, you know the whole business of the Homeric myth just so familiar to me, which I didn't even understand until I was teaching Homer for about five years in a row and I go like: 'Oh my God! That's my family! How could this be?' And, well, I think about it and say, well, there was this tremendous influence in southern Italy and in Sicily, so these Greek myths, so I recognize with the fullness of my heart the beauty of the patriarchal ideas. I do not dismiss it. I think it's stupid. On the other hand, as a feminist, I resent terribly, that these feminist ideas and ideals went repressed under the patriarchal history. Because, clearly, in the Mediterranean, and I just love that our peninsula and your island go right out into the middle of that water, right, and disconnect all the continents, and honestly, I think south of Italy and Sicily are much more part of the Middle East than they are part of the north of Europe. I mean, in cultural terms, they have the richness of these more ancient cultures of Crete, of Greece, of Phoenicia, you know, it's all layered into that culture, I mean, with all due respect, northern Europe is too detached emotionally from there and I don't feel connected to that. I don't. I don't feel connected to that northern European mode of rationalism, that reason is the only thing that counts. Of course reason counts! But not to the exclusion of everything else.

My own feminism comes from the early 60s and 70s and my ideas about it, and it could be either way that the myth of Persephone and Demeter began to mean more to me than

as I became more and more deeply feminist. Certainly I became aware that these whole mythic structures, Robert Graves goes, you know, through the Great Mother myth and how it was repressed and he details that so beautifully as to which myth supersedes the other and how and that was again another revelation to me. And then I just began to think, to embrace it as ‘This myth is part of me. I am part of this myth. This belongs to me.’ And when I began to write seriously, at one point I thought: I’m gonna write this story that uses that myth. I’m pretty sure I went to Hesiod and read his version of it and that’s when I began specifically to embed *Seeding Memory*.

Valentina: This is not the first time you employ this myth in your writings. In *Seeding Memory* the myth is symbolic of the mother-daughter bond and, at once, it is also symbolic of the passage from childhood into womanhood. In *The Anarchist Bastard* the myth is employed again to describe the bond between mother and daughter and later on your relationship with the Catholic Church. *Seeding Memory* is a fictional work, while *The Anarchist Bastard* is a memoir. How does the myth change from one work to the other?

Clapps Herman: Honestly, I think, Valentina, that at this point it’s so profoundly embedded in me that I don’t even think I’m thinking about it officially. I think it’s coming directly out of my unconscious. For example, it’s only in our conversation today that I realized the two most recent pieces that I wrote, in effect, have pieces of the Persephone and Demeter myth in them without my having realized that and, I didn’t even say this, but there is a poem I wrote that I realized ‘Oh! That’s...it’s there too!’ it’s just so in me!

I was very conscious of using it in *Seeding Memory*.

In *The Anarchist Bastard*, I think it’s just part of the way I breathe and think and I’m somebody who believes this about writing. I believe that writing happens best when

we're pulling from our own unconscious and as the ideas change into language we're writing them down and that's when we're at our best. Sometimes it's exploding out of us. So that relationship between what gets buried and what comes into light, so to speak, which, I mean, could there be anything more directly connected between Persephone and Demeter? No! So, I think, I don't even think about it anymore! It's just there.

Valentina: How has your understanding of this myth changed over time?

Clapps Herman: I would say it's been more and more powerful. And now I understand it's a much deeper cycle; the whole myth is part of a much deeper cycle. The Isis myth in Egypt and, I can't catalogue it for you, but I know I've come over of the series of female mother-goddess myths that are specifically, they're all part of the same cycle.

Valentina: When you work with the myth of Demeter and Persephone, is it always Homer's version you have in mind?

Clapps Herman: No, I don't think so. When I wrote *Seeding Memory* I looked at Hesiod. At one point I knew exactly which flowers were represented by her and I can't remember what happened, but my sister at one point sent me a bouquet of flowers that included every single flower in the Demeter story and I just thought it was typical of my sister. It must have been when I had my story published. I remember the bouquet coming, and it being handed to me by the door men and I called her up and said: 'Oh, Lucia, these are so beautiful!' and she said: 'Did you see that they're all the Demeter flowers?' and I hadn't really realized that! [Clapps Herman reading from Hesiod] So, I'm reading from Hesiod, Homeric Hymn, the epic Cycle and I'm on page 289: 'I began to sing of rich-haired Demeter' – rich-haired, see, I love that 'cause that's the fertility, it's the lusciousness. 'Awful goddess – of her and her trim-ankled daughter whom Aidoneus rapt away, given to him by all-seeing Zeus the loud-thunderer. Apart from

Demeter, the lady of the golden sword and glorious fruits, she was playing with the deep-bosomed daughters of Oceanus and gathering flowers over a soft meadow, roses and crocuses and beautiful violets, and irises and hyacinths and the narcissus.' So, that was my sister. She created this bouquet out of those beautiful flowers and I thought it was so touching of her. And then there is the idea that this daughter on the one hand, you know, some people see it as an abduction and a rape, and a violation of the daughter; on the other hand it's a marriage. She's living with a man. And it is true as a mother, I mean, I work so hard to try to be not the Italian mother who wants her children to stay close to her forever, 'cause you do feel that way about your children, you never want them to leave, you want to see them every day. But to let go, you have to let go of that. And, in a way, of course, Demeter is unable to do that. She goes into mourning. How could her daughter be taken from her? That is one way to look at it. And I think that is the eternal dilemma of the life cycle, the agricultural cycle, the life cycle, to give birth. You love these babies, you love them more than you love anything. Nothing is more important to you but their protection, their wellbeing. You would do anything. You don't care about anything other than their health and their wellbeing. And then, in order for their health and wellbeing, you have to let them go. And then when they're teenagers and they're taking all kind of risks and do scary things, you have to let them take their own risks. You have to let them go underground. You have to let them do things that are maybe not the best for them, and they are going to go to hell. You know, so to speak, they are! That's the nature of growing up. And it's very hard to be.

Valentina: The myth of Persephone is present in your memoir, not only on a narrative level, but also from a linguistic perspective. For instance, when you talk about your

grandmother Bessie's mental issue, you say she 'descended' into madness, like Persephone descends into darkness. Or in the chapter 'My Aboriginal Women' you describe the cleaning of the house as a 'cycle' which mirrors the cycle of the season expressed by the myth of Persephone. You say: 'Our cleaning ceremonies mirror the agricultural cycle my mother has grown up with [...] Today, "the good laundry".' In relation to this cycle you describe yourself as a 'virgin at the temple'. Are all these expressions a clear way to evoke the myth of Persephone, or is the myth so rooted in your life that it just resurfaces naturally?

Clapps Herman: There is no question here, Valentina. I'd say, unequivocally, totally and directly out of my unconscious. And I teach my students all the time: 'Recognize what your unconscious is doing, so that you can push it further', right? But in this case, it just comes out naturally to me to talk that way. And certainly, when my grandmother Bessie, whose name was Beatrice, she had a real tragic life. And she certainly did descend into an abyss and never to return. And I've often wondered: where was her mother? Because, my own father's understanding is that her mother had a weak mind. She was mentally ill, I guess, but some people feel she went through so many post-partum depressions and they didn't know how to bring her back right out to the light. And there weren't medications, there wasn't a good psychiatrist, you know. She descended underground and never came back to us. And as a child, I was gripped by her. I had this grandmother who I was never allowed to see. Who was walked away. And she was so beautiful.

Valentina: In the myth we can see a deep bond between mother and daughter, Demeter and Persephone, but we can also see a deep bond between Hades and his brother Zeus. In fact, it was Zeus who allowed Hades to abduct Persephone. Would you recognize the

same pattern of bonding in your family? How would you explain the role of your great grandmother towards Bessie? Do you think she really contributed to Bessie's illness?

Clapps Herman: I do think. Or at least, some of the stories told to my mother by various neighbours who knew the family, and one great-aunt married into the family. I would say that my great grandmother, Mommanonna we called her, who was Filomena Clapps, I would say she was so identified with the patriarchal culture, I mean, she was a member and she was so: 'My son, my son, my son', and she was male identified; she was a male-identified woman. And, by the way, she was the dominant figure in her marriage. So she was more of a male-like *persona*, very much like Mario Puzo describes his mother, in *Fortunate Pilgrim*. Are you aware of what Mario Puzo said about *The Godfather*, that he modelled the Godfather on his mother? And Davide Chase, who created *The Sopranos*, said the same thing. They had these tough mothers. And that's where these male figures are based on.

Valentina: What's your position with regard to Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*? Do you think it is a stereotypical representation of Italian American people?

Clapps Herman: *The Godfather* is a great, heroic, tragic story. Very using the great tragic structure that Aristotle talks about and I can lay out deliberately what the heroic criteria is for certain male heroic behaviour, and that's the structure he's using. That's not pop culture nonsense. It's not. It's Aristotle, he's using Aristotle. Well, it so happens that Aristotle is Greek and comes out of one of the great patriarchal Western myths. So to me it is a very trivial and superficial analysis of *The Godfather* and missing the whole point. And I mean, people say that about *The Sopranos* too and I don't think so. I think these guys completely understand the cultures they came from. And, you know, you can't write stories without writing about conflict and trouble. If you wanna go, you

know, see how beautiful the Italian culture is, go to Little Italian Festa and eat your pastries and listen to the music. But don't expect to get that to come out of the writing because in order to write you have to go to the dark side of life. You cannot write a story without attending to the light and the dark, the terrible and the beautiful. That is the nature of writing. Otherwise you don't have a story. 'Oh, I had a beautiful day and had a beautiful time!' What kind of story is that? Who cares? You start it out: 'A beautiful day, and I had to go shopping, and I was buying a dress for a wedding. Wouldn't she know that the minute I left the house it started pouring rain on me? And when I got to the store I realized I had forgotten everything at home: my credit card, my money.' Well, now you have a story. 'Cause you have trouble.

Valentina: So you wouldn't say it is a stereotypical representation of...

Clapps Herman: Look, there is some truth to that, but there are also other mafia stories told and they are not *The Godfather* and they are not *The Sopranos* and they – no one pays attention to that.

Valentina: Maybe it's because *The Godfather* was...

Clapps Herman: No! It's because it's brilliant. It's because it's brilliant writing, brilliant directing, brilliant acting. That's why people love it. It's a story of a great hero. When Michael – the most American one – is young, he's innocent, he doesn't wanna be part of the family. The tragedy is that he's dragged in and this is the story of the great tragic hero. Against his better wishes, he must either save his father and join the family or allow his father to die. And he makes the loving choice at his own risk. And that's what a tragic hero does, is they make a choice for a greater good at their own expense. I mean, I could do a whole analysis of *The Godfather* and describe how Michael is the

only one whose life is destroyed, so although he doesn't have the death at the end, he had the death of his soul. His soul had been taken away. His only motivation is when he's at the hospital by the way, in the dark, right, and he looks at his father, and he realizes that Sonny can't protect his father, and he says: 'I'm with you Pa, I'll take care of you, don't worry.' Because he realized Sonny is inapt to the job and he must step up to save his father. That's what I mean about the beauty of the patriarchal myth. So she's giving a very superficial reading.

Valentina: Have you ever thought of yourself as a possible Persephone?

Clapps Herman: I felt caught between Waterbury, my Italy, and the farm is still there. It just stopped functioning a year or two ago. My uncle Rocco, the only surviving son, he inherited it and he farmed just like people have been farming for centuries and centuries and centuries. I mean really, they made the bread until World War II. They made the bread every week, they made the prosciutto, they made the cheese, they made all the stuff. All the ancient stuff. I mean all the stuff that has been going on for centuries in Italy. I mean, I was raised with that, right? So, Waterbury is my Italy in a way, although I love going back to southern Italy, I love it! And New York, well, that's my ancient world, this is my modern world and I felt completely separate and I don't know which one is the descent and which one is the ascent, I don't know, but it certainly was – I would go back there and I was living in one place, and then I would come back here and I was living in another.

Valentina: Descent and ascent, they are both worlds of discoveries in a way.

Clapps Herman: Yeah, that's a good point. Very nice. Yes, you're right.

Valentina: How does this myth help you to bridge your Italian heritage to the American heritage?

Clapps Herman: I think it gave me a structure to think about it. You see, and then, then I met my Italian American community, Edi Giunta, Nancy Carnevale, Joe Sciorra, a million people, Annie Lanzillotto, Maria Laurino. All of these people have become my friends. Finally I had a world that was integrated. And then when Edi and I started talking about the myth of Persephone and the Demeter myth, I knew she was my Sicilian sister when she said: ‘Yes, me too! I love it too! Yes, I’m so interested! Yes! Isn’t it beautiful? Isn’t it important?’

Valentina: In the chapter ‘Stitching Our Voices Together’ you describe the ritual of knitting and how this art has been passed down from one generation of women of the family to the next. According to John Heath, there is a deep connection between the storytelling carried out by women in old Greece and the act of wool working. Heath argues that the survival of mythological narrative is to be attributed to the women, who used to keep them alive and pass them on orally from one generation to another during the act of weaving. Were there specific stories you and your family used to tell each other while knitting? Myths, perhaps?

Clapps Herman: I haven’t heard that theory before, but it makes a great deal of sense to me. And it’s profoundly true. I would say it was all of the rituals we enacted. Well, a great deal of this book comes from the fact that I sat in circle after circle after circle all of my life, all of my childhood, all of my growing years with women and children doing things and talking. And, sure, when we were younger, we wouldn’t tell any story, we would just sit and listen, you know, and the same stories were told over and over and over every time. Now, certainly sewing was, it’s very meditative. I love all needle work.

Here's a lovely little detail: my sister, whose name is Lucia, after my grandmother, she has a real Italian beauty about her, she has one of those faces, one of those serene beautiful faces, there's something so lovely about her, I'll show you a picture. And she was the kind of woman that people would follow down the street by the way. She just had a look that people were drawn to, and a quiet, very quiet demeanour and something very special about the aura of her, and she took up spinning as a young woman, and weaving, and she went to my grandmother and told her: 'Grandma! I'm learning how to spin' and my grandmother went to the cache, and pulled out her own spindle, from her own girlhood, and gave it to my sister. We are talking about something that had been buried. She waited for the return because certainly her own daughter didn't spin. But she had. So here in America these many agricultural seasons later, she took the spindle out and gave it to my sister. And that was why when I came upon this infancy gospel of James about the life of Mary and the spinning being the central image. Mary is called to the temple to spin, I cannot tell you how powerful it is, it is a similar power for me as the Persephone and Demeter myth. In any case, what John Heats is saying rings true to me in many ways. I think you could make a broader definition of spinning. And the reason why I love the Mary spinning the holiest of threads is she's called to the temple by the High Priests to spin the scarlet thread. That's what she's called to do. The holiest of the holy threads. And the idea of the spinning, if we talk about spinning, it looks like DNA, right, these things wrapped around here. But it's also, it does evoke copulation, in a sense, or some very very very aboriginal moment of life. It makes sense to me that Mary would be spinning by the well when Gabriel comes to announce she would be the God bearer. See, without Mary, they had no way to get God to earth. Right? She wasn't

just a vessel. She was the God bearer. She brought him to earth. So, excuse me, don't get rid of her story, please. And I love the image of the spinning.

Valentina: Myth and memory are both based on storytelling, so their survival is subject to the telling and retelling of these stories. In this regard, who was in charge of keeping your family's history alive? From the memoir it seems that on the one hand your mother, Rose, was the one who treasured all the family's memories. On the other though, from the chapter 'My Father Telling Stories' it seems that your father, Peter, plays a great role too in the preservation of family stories. What is the difference between the stories your father used to tell and the ones your mother used to tell?

Clapps Herman: It's a wonderful question. There's a very important distinction because my father was aware of himself as a storyteller and used the classic storytelling devices that Homer uses. He used repeated phrases and he literally would compose his tale. And he would make up rhetorical devices, like he would use dramatic image. And once he had composed the tale he pretty much told it the same way over and over and over again. And he had a whole cycle of stories that he told all over our lives. They're really charming and they're really classic oral tales. His uncle Paul had been a storyteller and I think he must have learnt it from Uncle Paul, and Uncle Paul probably learnt this from his grandfather. D'you know what I mean? I'm sure that this goes back right through the centuries of somebody passing on these devices. Nobody explaining what the devices are or explaining that they fill in the meter. But they are memory, they are mnemonic devices from memory. So, my father was very aware of his being a storyteller and he would take the room. My mother was simply always telling stories. She was fascinated by the content: 'And then do you know what happened?' There were a million stories that she told over and over and over again. And my aunt, who is 98

years old, is going to be interviewed by this historian from Waterbury, because all of those women are storytellers. They are simply gripped by the narrative of their lives. In other words, since they don't have the benefit of a wider education or a wider world, their own narratives are the structures that they live within. And after all, they had a very difficult and painful childhood. They worked brutally hard, their father was violent, and so we could say the trauma also encoded these stories in them. I always thought of my father as the official storyteller, but of course my mother is encoding her family stories and my father was encoding his stories. So that's one distinction.

Valentina: In your book you never mention forms of racism.

Clapps Herman: Well, that's in the next one. You know, in Waterbury, first of all I lived in the Italian community, and like all the other kids, you know, they were Irish or German or Jewish or whatever, we were all ethnic kids together. So there were Protestants and they were officially better than us but there were so many of us, we didn't really pay attention to them that much. We knew that they were a higher class, we knew they had more money, they went to better schools, we knew that, but they weren't in our world and we were so many hundreds of us, noisy and loud and it wasn't like we thought we were superior to them or anything, although, frankly now I believe we are, you know, more alive, superior in that sense of being more vital and alive. I felt that I was definitely from a community that was not of the upper classes by all means, although we never called ourselves working class, ever! We were just Italian. And we were actually a racist community against the African Americans. Just as the Irish had been with us and so forth, you know. It was always one group opposing the other. And I did write an essay about that, about racism and the racism my family engaged in. I remember it was in High School and my sister was showing me out to work with an

African American group of children. And she was talking about how, it would have been a singing contest in the parks, and she was working with these children in some kind of a temple and she said: 'Look, they sang so beautifully, without question, better than the others, but they didn't win the contest.' She said: 'It was just racism!' and that's what opened my eyes, I started to cry for those kids. Up until that day racism was an ordinary part of my life.

Valentina: In the first chapter of the memoir, 'My Homer', you explain how your family traditions are based on values portrayed by Homer in his epic stories, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*. These values are the *nostos*, travel, *nekyia*, the ability to talk to the dead, *moira*, fate, and *xenia*, hospitality. Another Greek element which emerges from your narrative, though, is the separation between *oikos* and *agora*. How would you describe the distribution of public and domestic spaces in terms of gender?

Clapps Herman: There was no question. There was an absolute distinction. Domestic life belonged to us, the women, and the girls. And outside of the house, not in terms of shopping, but in terms of any physical labour, that was for husbands and the boys. So, for example, was very hierarchical, there was a hierarchy: the oldest male, my grandfather, was the boss. And then my grandmother and then the oldest male of the next generation, and everybody used this hierarchical distribution so you would say: 'He's your oldest brother, you've gotta listen to him!' or 'Don't you see your brother wants something to eat? Go get it for him!' 'Don't you see he wants his shirt ironed?' On the other hand, there was that classic thing: they were supposed to protect you and take care of you. But we did not see that as a diminution of ourselves. We were proud of our female roles. We loved needle working and sewing and all of that. We were very proud of being able to make our own clothes, taking care of the children. We did not

feel diminished by that. On the other hand, you know when my mother was raised, she had some Sicilian friends and they were not allowed to sit in the living room, because the living room windows were on the street. Now, that's lack of the *agora*. You can't be in the proper space. She and her sisters, rather, were treated like really good Italian girls, and they had to do their jobs and they were allowed more freedom. Not to date, no! I don't know how they were supposed to marry, they were not allowed to talk to boys, ever! My aunt was telling this story, she was walking up the hill and the son of a very close friend of my grandfather's walked her up the hill. She got a beating. Because she was not supposed to talk to a boy by herself. Who knows what will happen! But it's not my generation, you know. We went on the bus, we went out by ourselves, you know, there were no restrictions on us. Whereas on my mother and her sisters did. They had to be chaperoned a lot. They weren't allowed to go to college. Who knows what could happen if you send your children to college...

But *xenia*, that was absolutely the primary value in our family. There was no greater value. And, frankly, I think that in Homer's, especially in the *Odyssey*, it is very clear that that is the civilizing rule. That's the rule that is not asking anybody's name. First you invite them in, then you wash their feet, then you give them wine, then you give them clothes, then you give them the bed and *then* you ask their name. It was almost still intact. It was close enough to being intact that my mother could tell that story about that man coming to the farm and she said: 'And she didn't even ask his name!' Well, my mother didn't ever read Homer! She does not know this is a rule of *xenia*! And that she uses it.

Valentina: The *nostos*, which refers to the idea of travel, is also related to the idea of desire for home, a desire to return. How was that desire expressed in your family? Did your ancestors ever wish to return to their homeland?

Clapps Herman: They talked about it all the time. All the time on a daily basis: ‘You don’t know what the air was like there. The water was so pure. The vegetables were better.’ You know, they longed with such great *nostos*, with such great nostalgia, so great longing, just like Odysseus. They longed and never allowed themselves to go back. My sister and I went in ’64 and then we went a bunch of times in between and then we went this time again, right, but we haven’t been in a long time, maybe 20 years. We walked down the streets, you cannot walk more than two feet you just can’t: ‘Ooooooh! I’m the cousin of the cousin bla bla...ooooohh come with me.’ The whole thing gets re-enacted. We are completely and totally embraced. And after I had just written this book, and about one of theirs and calling him a ‘bastard’. And they understood. And they said: ‘Why? Why?’ and I said: ‘Cause men have no right to be that violent,’ and that they understood.

Valentina: But that’s not the title you wanted to give to the book, is it?

Clapps Herman: I didn’t. I really didn’t. One title I wish I had used was ‘Before and After Tinfoil’, another ‘Words and Rags’. I can’t even remember, the original title was ‘From Another Time and Place’. That was my original working title. But my editor didn’t want it.

Valentina: A professor from the Italian Studies Department, Maria Cristina Mauceri, reading the title, once said to me: ‘I thought you were working on women’s writing.’

Clapps Herman: It’s very misleading, this title. My editor wanted it to be a dramatic title. And I’ll tell you, all my writer friends in New York say: ‘Oh! That’s the best title

I've ever heard!' because it's dramatic. I never thought like that. But it is interesting that my male editor picked it.

Valentina: But he picked it because these are the words you use to describe your grandfather in the memoir.

Clapps Herman: Yes, but it was only one essay. My grandfather, he was committed, he was serious about this stuff. He was committed in the best sense, in the good sense, of being very political. But at home, you know, how do they say? House devil, world angel... or something like that! Well, outside the house everybody looooved Vito. But inside the house, he was very hard on his family. Very hard. And, I did love him. I'm not saying I didn't. But I think that violence is really inappropriate. Look, you're saying you're 'Mr Lefty', then why are you oppressing your own people? Right? So, he wanted anarchy politically, but emotionally he wanted to be the king. These two things don't go together. That was what I was really thinking about. I do feel the title's offensive, but there's nothing I can do about it now. It's too late.

Valentina: Can you tell me something about the 'law of silence' which ruled in your family? Was this related to the idea of *moira* and the family's reputation?

Clapps Herman: There's another word for reputation in Homer, an important word. It's the essential thing. Your reputation is everything. For reputation the hero has to be willing to risk his life. *Kleos*, this is the word. 'What are the people gonna think about you?' And the word is etymologically related to the word 'call', what you are called, and that was something that was repeated in my family all the time: 'But what would the people say about you? No, no, no, the people are not gonna like that!' my grandmother would say, you know. And you had to be aware of that. It's a shame-driven culture, shame and honour as opposed to guilt and anxiety. In order to have

honour you must keep the shame-driven things hidden. So my father was profoundly ashamed of the things that happened to his family, the tragedies. Which is why we had to be quiet about that. 'Cause it also means to protect them. You know, my father told me once: 'You know, your sister reminds me so much of my older brother. She's so beautiful,' and so I asked him a couple of questions and he says: 'No, alright, I don't wanna talk about it anymore.' That was the end of the discussion. It was just me and he walking down the road and he never said that directly to my sister. He never told her: 'You remind me of my older brother, whom I loved so much.' And that's silence. What would be at risk there? Nothing but emotion. But it's too painful. And anything that was wrong, you know, you just had to be quiet about it. Silence.

Valentina: It is my understanding that your grandfather, Vito Becce, the 'anarchist bastard' of the title, was a man who could only rule with violence. Nonetheless, your father was nothing like that. When you say that your family was based on a highly patriarchal system, are you referring to your mother's family or also to your own family?

Clapps Herman: Both, both of them. Absolutely! Both my grandfathers were *primo figlio*, both of them. So they both had that authority that the firstborn son has, and they were equally violent. And equally moved with an iron hand. Exactly the same. My father lost one brother basically because of the way my grandfather treated him – his brother. And he had this younger brother, my uncle Paul. He basically stepped in as the good father. He didn't have a child until he was in his middle age, so he parented them, all of my grandfather's children. He loved Bessie too. He didn't like the way she was treated. Even by his own mother – Mammanonna. And he was very protective of her, was very kind and loving. And I feel he gave my father a model of how to be a good

adult male. I think, he had this model of my uncle Paul to turn to in his head. And my father still had a bad temper because, of course, he had been raised in great violence, but he would try very hard to control it. And he was a very loving man. And when he died, his four grandchildren just wept and wept and wept. They still talk about him all the time, they all say: 'We didn't wanna lose Grandpa, it was too early.' They adored him. And both he and my mother were spectacular grandparents: loving, generous, caring. You know, all the sweet stuff.

Valentina: When you talk about your Italian family, you never talk about an Italian community. You always refer to it as a 'tribe'. What is the difference?

Clapps Herman: There were so many of us. And we all lived in the same neighbourhood. So, for example, I had friends at school, but I didn't think about them 'cause I had so many cousins, female cousins my same age, who lived next door to me. D'you know what I mean? We did everything together: we all went skiing, we all went swimming, and then we all went ice skating, and then we all went to a picnic. It's not that you mean to put anybody else away, it's just that this tribe is so big and all of the relatives from New York would come and those from New Jersey would come and you know, it was a world to live in. And it wasn't like we didn't have our neighbours, or we weren't friends with other people. We were. But this was the centre. It was so vital. Wouldn't you call that tribal? It was tribal in the sense that it was sealed to a degree. So much so that my husband, who is 17 years older than I am, and when I met him he was in his forties and I was in my twenties, so, you know, it was a big age difference. He was clearly middle age and I was clearly young and my mother did not want me to date him. She met him and she didn't like what he wore, his blue jeans. She was very disapproving. We went to visit my father, who had a heart attack, and he said: 'Don't

worry Jo, they're so tribal, they won't make you an outcast so they have to take me in the house. So don't worry about that. It's not a problem.' And I understood that he was right.

Valentina: In Italian American literature it has been noticed how the role of grandmothers is pivotal in the passing down of Italian traditions and identity. What is your relationship with your grandmothers in this regard?

Clapps Herman: Well, there was one of my grandmothers who was this mythological buried problem. Otherwise, there was this step-grandmother and she was quite lovely to us. I loved it, but I didn't feel that emotionally close to her. She had her own grandchildren, you know. But my mother's mother, I was very very very very very attached to her. I am still emotionally very attached to her. I still feel the blood connection. And she passed down all the family traditions to us. You learned these traditions by living there. It's not that there was anybody pedagogically explaining them to you. We were living in it and I must have passed these things unconsciously on to my son.

Valentina: Who fuelled your literary interests? From the narrative of the *Anarchist Bastard*, it seems that your father was the one who passed on to you the passion for reading, while your mother would tell you to do the dishes. Nonetheless, it was your mother who fought for your college education, and your sister's as well, facing your male relatives' remark 'Do they think they're so smart?' How would you explain this contradiction?

Clapps Herman: So, organically, my father was the reader, and sat and read to us, and told us stories and all of that. But my mother had longed to go to college. She was brought up on pig farms, but she had a regal elegance about her. She aspired to

something bigger than the farm. Whereas my father aspired to the larger world. He wanted us to travel. And organically, that she was the one who had aspirations for us, it is interesting, she was more driven by the code, so she wanted us to go up on the ladder, the official ladder, and go to college and get an education. Whereas he wanted the world more available to us. He would take us to New York all the time. 'Let's go to New York!' He'd come home from work early and say: 'Rose, pack the kids, we're going to New York today!' So, he wanted the adventure. She was the one who fought for us. She fought hard too because we were a working-class family, it was a huge expense. A huge expense. And it was really hard on us.

Valentina: And it was a challenge to the way the Italian American community thought of women's education.

Clapps Herman: Yes! Yes! We were the only ones who went to college at that state. And that was because my father made more money. My oldest female cousin didn't get to go to college. Lucia and I had, and the next two girls had. Only eight of us out of seventeen went to college. And believe me, those families could have afforded that. Why didn't he send his two oldest grandchildren to college? Why not? He read the *New York Times* every day, he listened to the opera every week, he was a sophisticated man, intellectually. I think it's a scandal that he didn't. See, he didn't want to spend the money. But he wanted to send my mother 'cause she was his favourite daughter, but my grandmother wouldn't let her go because who knows: 'Look what happens with that girls who go away.' They eat the pomegranate seeds. I think you can easily say it: 'Going to college is eating the pomegranate seeds'. And d'you wanna know something? I ate the whole fruit. His only son, he made him work so hard on the farm he barely finished grammar school. And I was very close to my uncle who inherited the farm and

inherited all the money but my grandfather was too hard on him. Really too hard on him. His only son. In fact, my uncle Rocco used to say: 'Oh sure, Papa would go into town and talk to all the guys and city hall,' which he did, my grandfather was very political and he would go talk to other guys, all mayors, all the civic leaders, he was friends with them. 'Oh yeah, Papa would go talk to and he would be bullshitting with them and he left me to do all the work!' 'Oh yeah, he was a big shot,' he said. So it was true, he was the only child. He shouldn't have done that to his only son. He should have protected his son. Hire another working man!

Valentina: How do you position in relation to the question of 'hyphenate or not to hyphenate' the Italian American binomial?

Clapps Herman: I always call myself Italian and we all call ourselves Italian. We knew we were American, of course, but we identified as Italian. When I went to college, I started caring about this hyphenation stuff. So I adopted it because that was the way we were supposed to say it: Irish-American, Italian-American, but it wasn't normal to me, it wasn't. This is just not the way I think about myself. When I'm in Italy, I know that I am American. First of all, I don't have enough of the language. I'm very sad that I'm not fluent. I'm not. But, I'm both American and Italian. Much more than I am Italian-American. That hyphen bothers me. It feels like I'm diluting it. And I don't want any dilution.

Valentina: In a recent interview, Helen Barolini argued that Italian American literature has to be part and parcel of the American literary mainstream as Italian American authors write in English. Do you agree? What is your position toward the American literary canon and the status quo of Italian American literature?

Clapps Herman: I agree with her that we of course should be as much part of the mainstream as possible. I'm proud to be an Italian American, to be honest. *Malia Collective* has recently hired a young graduate student to get a list of Italian American writers on Wikipedia, because we want to be part of the literary world. I don't like it that the only Italian American writers that are known are Puzo, DeLillo, Talese. I think that's sad. Inappropriate. On the other hand, I'm thrilled to be part of the Italian American community because I didn't have a base from which to write until I found those people. And I don't know what would have happened. I had been trying to write for a long time without my community but it was once I found them that I knew I had a platform under my feet from which to write from. So, I am thrilled to be an Italian American, I am thrilled, and I think we belong to this part of the mainstream canon. I think Italian Americans didn't start writing their literature till late because there was a real hostility in the community against education because most of the people who immigrated to America they were from the south, they were hard-working peasants and they had been excluded from education for so long in the south because of Garibaldi, I guess. But that's a complicated story. But having been deprived of education they have learned to make their way against the education system. D'you know Leonard Covello? He's Bessie's cousin. So here's the irony about my sitting in the library reading *him* and my mother saying that you have to come home and nobody explained to me why this is the conflict and I have to read this book, but I can't, I have to go home and do the dishes...

Valentina: What is your relationship with the Italian language? Do you speak Italian?

Clapps Herman: My Italian is travel Italian and I am sad to say that it's not as good as I would like it to be. Even the dialect. We were not fluent in the dialect because, again,

it was the secret language they spoke and whispered to each other. All of them were fluent in their dialect. All my family. Whenever I live in Italy my Italian begins to come back to me very quickly. I can catch a lot of what I'm hearing. Nonetheless, and I agree it should be a component of my identity, I am sad that it's not, but I refuse to think it doesn't give me the identity.

Valentina: Do you think that the myth of Persephone, besides being employed for the reasons we have seen so far, might also be a way for Italian American writers to claim their belonging to their Italian heritage? That is, myth offers an alternative way to express authors' Italian identity when the Italian language fails them?

Clapps Herman: That's a wonderful question and something I gave great deal of thought to. I think once I left my community and realized the loss that ensued as a result of that, in part I began to recognize what was with me that genuinely belonged to me as an Italian woman. Certain things. But then as I got older and, in a certain way further apart, I began to also cling towards me. I pulled towards me more. That's Italian and that's me.

Valentina: Why did you choose to write a memoir instead of a fictional work?

Clapps Herman: My first love was the novel. There was no question that the novel was the form. I wanted always to be a novelist. And then, because of my own conflict about being an Italian American, and what my status was in the world, see this is the downside of where I came from, I was supposed to be in a certain place in the home and in the family, and, yes, I was supposed to work but not become too big. No, you're not supposed to have big big status. And I think I literally enacted that, and to be a writer you have to have an ego. You have to say, 'My time is important. Shut up, I'm not listening to you. No, I'm not answering the phone.' Right? You have to push everything

away. And that was very hard for me to conduct. By the time I decided, I was 50, my son was 15, and I thought, 'My son is gonna be out of the house in a very short time and I still haven't done the things that are important to me yet.' Now, teaching is equally important to me, I love teaching, but this other dream was buried. So my intention was to teach myself how to write short stories so that I could learn what the narrative structure was. I think narrative structure is essential. You cannot write a short story or a novel unless you know what you're talking about narratively. And I worked very hard to learn how to do it. And it's not easy to learn. It sounds easy, but it's not to actually enact and do it and it's much harder than to learn it. But my intention then was to start writing novels. That was the plan. So I finally worked and worked and worked and I gave it to an agent to get that published and this is what happened. She didn't get them published. They came very close, but it just didn't happen. My father died, my son went to college and my husband became Dean. And these three important people in my life disappeared. All at once. And I got so depressed, I could barely function. One could say I went underground. And I didn't write for five years. And then, by the time I found my Italian American community, the memoir was in ascendency and first, I would start to write a few pieces 'cause someone would say 'Would you like to contribute to an anthology?', or I was going to a conference and I was writing something to fit the conference and then, gradually, they started to accumulate and then I thought: 'This is a memoir. Assemble it and add to it.' So it unfolded organically over time. And I love the form of the memoir. I think it's an organic and natural form. I think it gave voice to a lot of people who were voiceless.

Valentina: Vico said that fantasy is dilated or composed memory. Do you agree? And what is the boundary then between fantasy and memory?

Clapps Herman: I don't think there is a big boundary. I think it slides and I think... Look at Joyce. What did he write? Nothing but Dublin. Nothing but his life as a boy in Dublin. I think the forms are linked and this is the form of our time. Just as the novel has been the form of our time. And before it was something else. Epic poetry. In Shakespeare's time it was the play. Forms organically rise. We don't tell the forms which to rise, they tell us. And right now it's the memoir. It's a beautiful form. I'm not saying there aren't bad memoirs, there are bad poems around too these days. With every form comes good and bad versions.

Valentina In your memoir you don't describe your journey to Italy. Nonetheless, you describe your travel from Manhattan to Waterbury as a journey from America to Italy and from the future to the past. Can you tell me something about it?

Clapps Herman: I do intend to write those journeys.

Valentina: Italy is what triggers the writing of the memoir. But for you Italy was in America.

Clapps Herman: That's right. But I don't think I fully understood that until I wrote the memoir and Edi Giunta said to me, 'You were raised in Italy.' And I was very proud when she said that!

Valentina: The memoir opens in a mythic time and describes the Greek values which contributed to shaping your family's code of behaviour. The last chapter closes with the description of another important value for your family, which is that of love. Nonetheless, in this chapter, your mom is affected by dementia and no longer remembers. She tells you of how a psychic told her that she had met your father several times in her previous lives. For example they were married in Persia, or she was one of

his seven wives in Egypt. And again we are in a mythic dimension which closes *The Anarchist Bastard*. Would you say your memoir has an intentional circular structure?

Clapps Herman: I was very thrilled when I realized that that was going to be the last chapter. I struggled very hard to think what is going to go where. How things should go. 'Cause I didn't write it in a sequence. When I realized that was the last chapter I was so happy. And I didn't know that right away. I knew it was right. My father and mother's love story was epic. There was no story my mother would love to tell more than my father falling in love with her. She was so madly in love with her and he with her. Even until the very end, the day he died. They just loved each other so profoundly and to me that she didn't remember his name but she still knew that whomever it was that she had loved, it was the most important thing that ever happened to her, and when she said that to me I wrote that note down and then I lost it. I don't think I was consciously creating the epic cycle, but I was very happy with the structure.

Valentina: What are you working on now?

Clapps Herman: I have been working on eight different pieces. I wanna write about the trip to Italy with my sister and about a lot of stuff that my mother has left me. Bring to light what was buried. All this stuff was in storage.

Valentina: How would you define your literary identity?

Clapps Herman: As a little girl I was obsessed with reading. My father read read read. So reading has always been a vital part of my life. When I was a little girl and I would go to the library and I would read my little books and I would think, 'Ooooooh! Someday I am gonna write a book,' but talk about mythological, that was a fantasy, the impossible dream. It could never have happened but I know that I wanted it.

Desperately. And I always wanted it but I didn't. But now it belongs to me. Because I struggled and struggled until I broke through. And of course the teaching writing group.

Valentina: Did women writers inspire you?

Clapps Herman: Virginia Woolf above all. I am mad for her. She's got a major influence in my life. Olivia Manning is someone I like. Homer and Tolstoy. Epic stories. My women colleagues, everybody. The Bronte sisters. The British novelists were incredibly important to me. My father used to read them to me.

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