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## I FOUND MYSELF SINGING IN THIS LAND: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES IN THE TUSCAN “CONTRASTO”

I love all the arts that can still remind me of their origin among the common people, and my ears are only comfortable when the singer sings as if mere speech had taken fire, when he appears to have passed into song almost imperceptibly. (Yeats, Essays 223)

This paper explores the representation and negotiation of ethnic identity in verbal art performances, through the analysis of the *Contrasto*, a Tuscan<sup>1</sup> Italian genre of sung improvised poetry. Following Del Giudice's definition, the *Contrasti* are “poetic ‘contests’, traditionally improvised, between two specific and stated adversaries. .. Although they are often musically lively and border on dance tune, *Contrasti* are also dramatic and heated debates”. (Del Giudice, 1995). The performances are public, usually done during local events, including feasts organized by the various district units of the parties, or by the parishes.

“Classic” definitions of ethnicity see ethnic groups as stable and self-perpetuating social units to which the individual belongs by birth or primary socialization, and which can be defined through sets of *traits*. This model, as Kroskrity has noted, tend to “reify” the concept of ethnicity (1993:191) ignoring the space of free decisionality that identity offers to the person, and possibly offering a supposedly objective base to racist and discriminatory claims.

In Italy today, traits definitions are used by the separatist movements, or associated with discriminatory statements against Southern Italians or recent immigrant groups. They imply a desire to fix both the self and the "other" in a stable and stabilizing identity. Identity then becomes the result of a process of external labeling, or attribution of an I.D., of a particular place in a group, and in a society. It becomes the starting point for

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<sup>1</sup> Tuscany is a region in central Italy, counting about 3.5 million people. It is closed to the north and east by the Apennine Mountains, and by the Tirreno Sea to the west, while a series of hillsides and plains connects it to the Latium region to the south. The Tuscan language includes many varieties (Giacomelli, 1984/85). The language spoken in Pistoia, is the ‘Pistoiese, Occidental, Tuscan’ language. The language spoken in

policies of identification, or categorization, of inclusion and exclusion, of establishment of borders and border-crossing.

Kroskrity has proposed to study “a given social identity in its interrelationships to other available social identities.” (1993:209). The sum of the available identities would then constitute a “repertoire” (1993) from which the person can choose. In this model, the individual is seen as an agent strategically using particular identities and actively redefining them and the roles associated with them. As I will show you soon, in the *Contrasti* the repertoire becomes evident in the way the artists choose to represent themselves across contexts.

As I will show you soon, in the *Contrasti* this repertoire becomes evident in the way the poets choose to represent themselves across contexts. In the *Contrasti*, the articulation of ethnic identity depends on the context, its negotiated meaning, and the forces operating in it. Bauman affirms that “Performance, like any other form of communication, carries the potential to rearrange the structure of social relations within the performance event and perhaps beyond it. The structure of social roles, relations, and interactions; the oral literary text and its meaning; and the structure of the event itself are all emergent in performance” (1986:4). Identity itself can be seen as emerging in performance. This analysis allows me to underline the active role of the individual in choosing and enacting their “repertoire” of identities. In the *Contrasti*, we can look at the mechanism of representation of Tuscan identities in the context of the cultures to which they refer.

The *Contrasto* takes its name, “contrast”, from the fact that two different figures, ideas, or things are depicted in it, and each is in turn defended and attacked, in an attempt to demonstrate the general inferiority of the one and superiority of the other. So, the *Contrasto* is a dialogue with the tendency to become a “duel”. The topics treated in a *Contrasto*, vary and are potentially limitless. Contrasts between various Tuscan cities are common, as well as those involving political figures, gender distinctions and social roles<sup>2</sup>. The *Contrasti* are performed by artists called *Poeti Bernescanti*, or simply Poets.

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Florence, to the South-East of Pistoia, is the ‘Fiorentino, Tuscan’. Tuscany today is an economically prosperous region, highly industrialized.

<sup>2</sup> Examples of topics are: “Husband and Wife”, “Hunter and Jackrabbit”, “Blonde and Brunette”, “Science and Nature”, “Water and Wine”, “Peasant and Landowner”, etc. The topics are supposed to be sung by two

Their structure is quite complex. They are formed by a series of chained Octets, where the first six verses have an alternated rhyme, while the last two have a “coupled” rhyme. (See **Example #1**). Each of the verses in the octet must be formed by 11 syllables. Although the number of syllables in each verse really depends from the way it is performed<sup>3</sup>. The poets use the different varieties of the Tuscan dialect and code-switch among them. The “poetic language” allows a high degree of semantic and grammatical creativity<sup>4</sup>.

### **Example #1:**

- 1-A C'è/ le/ bel/lez/ze/ ve/di/ le/ piú/ ra/re**  
There are the beauties, you see, the most rare
- 2-B o quella l' é la tera degli amori**  
oh, that is the land of loves
- 3-A doe si coltivano cose-e molto rare**  
where the rarest things are cultivated
- 4-B o specialmente delle rose e fiori**  
and especially roses and flowers
- 5-A o li non avrai delusioni amare**  
oh there you will not have bitter delusions
- 6-B o dove che si incontrano gli amori**  
where loves are encountered
- 7-C invece te che abiti a Scandicci**  
instead you, living in Scandicci
- 8-C e tu ti trovi sempre ne pasticci.**  
you always find yourself in a mess.

At the beginning of a performance, the poets usually sing a series of “opening octets” where they introduce themselves and greet the public. While they introduce themselves, the poets situate their identities each time in relation to the audience, the setting, and the other poet(s) present. And for what regards the poets, there are the layers

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poets. When three poets are present, themes can be proposed that require the expression of three different points of view and thus three participants.

<sup>3</sup> . The melody, for example, allows a multiplication of the syllables through pausing, division of the diphthongs, elision, or melismatic prolongation of vowels.

<sup>4</sup> The language of the *contrasti* disparages and ignores the common rules governing grammar and phrase formation in Italian. The preminence given to the sound, to the internal organization of the genre itself against the external organization/contraints of grammar, is striking. Even the semantic use is particular. The poet can create new words whose semanticity is null and at the same time reconstructed by the listeners,

of the identities they portray and of which they are invested during the Contrasti, as well as their own as artists and as persons. The identity chosen can be portrayed through many means, for example by using particular varieties of the Tuscan dialect. Here, anyway, I decided to focus on the conscious verbal self-identification in the opening octets. The poets are Altamante Logli and Realdo Tonti. Both of them are renowned and expert poets. Altamante, a man in his seventies, lives in the province of Florence. Realdo, a middle-aged man, lives in the province of Pistoia.

The ethnic identities in the Contrasti are connected to place. They are rarely defined at the regional level: the poets rarely talk about “being Tuscan” in their songs. Identity instead is connected to towns, villages, valleys and mountains, monuments and historical events and legends. We are looking at a repertoire of extremely situated (concretely situated) identities. De Simonis, regarding the Tuscans, talks about a “precise consciousness of the diversity of the other” (1984/85: 8-9), even among small villages very near to each other.

As you can see from the Schema #1, Altamante identified himself, in different performances, alternatively as Florentine, from Migliana, from Scandicci, from Cantagallo, from the Apennines, etc. Only once he identified himself as Tuscan, during a performance in Florence, notably at an event organized by a national association, the ARCI (Association of Italian Recreational Clubs). He would otherwise refer to the particular Tuscan sub-groups or sub-cultures<sup>5</sup>.

#### **Schema #1, Altamante’s Repertoire of Identities:**

<b>Repertoire of Identities</b>	<b>Place where he has invoked them</b>	<b>Setting</b>
Apennine, Mountains, Cantagallo (town, province of	- Migliana (town, Prato)	- Local feast

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often through assonances of meaning. Word use follows the needs of musicality as well, even the music is more important than the semantic meaning.

<sup>5</sup> Of course this might have been different if he had found himself outside of Tuscany (he performed many times in Latium, and once in Emilia) or outside of Italy (he performed in Switzerland), but I lack data for those occasions. Insight can be used, anyway, by comparing him to another poet, Mariani, from Latium, whose performance was recorded in Tuscany. This poet actually never underscore a Latial identity, but rather his sub-cultural group in Latium, and also declare himself akin to the Tuscan people.

Pistoia, Apennine mountains), Migliana (town, Province of Prato, Apennine mountains)		
Florence (city)	1) Papone (village, Province of Pistoia, southern part) 2) Lido di Pandoiano (village, Province of Livorno)	1) Festival of Communist Refoundation 2) Local traditional feast
Scandicci (town, Province of Florence), Tuscan (region)	- Florence	- Festival of the ARCI (Italian Association of Recreational Clubs)
Political identities: Communist Refoundation	- Papone (village, southern part of the Province of Pistoia)	- Festival of Communist Refoundation

The poet portrays the identity that allows him to feel closer to the audience. For example, in Migliana Altamante creates an association through a series of towns in the Apennine Mountains. When this is not possible using an ethnic category, he uses class identities, professional identities, or others. For example in Papone, a small village in the southern part of the province of Pistoia, the setting being a festival organized by the party of Communist Refoundation, he prefers to identify himself through a political identity, as part of Communist Refoundation (see [Schema #1](#)). This declaration of affiliation to the audience is revealing. The relationship of the Tuscan Poets with their audiences situates them close to the hearth of the social network. Thus the Tuscan ethnic identities and the communities to which they refer are *imagined* in the dialogue between the poets and their public.

The identity declared by the other poet is also relevant. Usually poets tend to propose different identifications from each other. So, when singing with Realdo, Altamante would rather not declare himself from Pistoia. This seems to set the base for the subsequent oppositional role-taking.

I now turn to the analysis of a short excerpt from a Contrasto, done toward the end of the performance in Papone. In this Contrasto, the poets switch and shift among several Tuscan identities, and contest the other's identity as well as those attributed to the self by the other person. Altamante had started his closing octet, evoking his travel back to Scandicci (FI), where he lives. Realdo also evokes the travel back to the plains (where Pistoia is located). At this point, Altamante produces an octet attacking Pistoia:

ALTAMANTE

**1 Torna a s- Pistoia la in quell'accquazione**

Go back to Pistoia, there, in that stormy downpour

2

Realdo: He! Ho! Bravo (Altamante)

**3 torna la nel mezzo ai gineprai**

go back there, in the middle of those tangles of troubles

**4 io ritorno alla mia abitazione**

I go back to my abode

**5 che a Pistoia un ci tornerei mai**

since I would never go back to Pistoia

**6 c'e' la paura po dell'infezione**

there is also the fear of the infection

**7 e poi ci sono tanti paretai**

and then there are so many tangles of walls

**8 ci son delle giornate tant' amare**

there are some days so bitter

**9 a forse sai di mosche e di zanzare.**

you know, by force of flies and of mosquitoes

Notice that he uses characteristics on the environment, its rainy and humid weather, and recalls the fact that in the past the area had Malaria. Realdo defends Pistoia and attacks Scandicci in turn:

REALDO

**10 C'e' le bellezze vedi le piu' rare**

There are the beauties, you see, the most rare

**11 o quella l' e' la tera degli amori**

oh, that is the land of loves

**12 doe si coltivano cose-e molto rare**

where the rarest things are cultivated

**13 o specialmente delle rose e fiori**

and especially roses and flowers

**14 o li non avrai delusioni amare**

- oh there you will not have bitter delusions  
**15 o dove che si incontrano gli amori**  
where loves are encountered  
**16 invece te che abiti a Scandicci**  
instead you, living in Scandicci  
**17 e tu ti trovi sempre ne pasticci.**  
you always find yourself in a mess.

Next, Altamante switches his identity to the mountains (Apennine, in the province of Pistoia):

ALTAMANTE

- 18 Ma -o son- (coughing) son venuto da le castagne e ricci**  
But I came from the chestnuts and the husks  
**19 dove nasce i Bbisenzio sopra l'Appennino**  
where the Bisenzio is born over the Appenine  
**20 l'acqua colava giu' da que' renicci**  
the water was dripping down from those sliding sand deposits  
**21 e ti bagno' i' ssolo poverino**  
and soaked your soil poor one  
**22 voglio vedere ome ti tu spicci**  
I want to see how you can unstick yourself  
**23 son nato fra la ch- fra i ccastagno e i' biancospino**  
I was born between the chestnut tree and the hawthorn  
**24 a Pistoia tu fa di' mmormorio**  
in Pistoia you make murmurs/grumble  
**25 tu bevi l'acqua dove piscio io.**  
you drink the water where I piss.

This switch leads the confrontation from one between Pistoia and Scandicci (FI), to one between the Mountains and the Plains (where Pistoia is located). Notice that Realdo had been the first one to mention the plains in his first closing octet. In the rest of the Contrasto, Realdo attacked the Mountain people in turn, identifying Altamante with the town of Cantagallo. Altamante attacks Pistoia. Later on Realdo shifted the theme by associating Pistoia with Florence: thereby contrasting the city with the countryside, and ended up claiming a Florentine identity. So in the end they have switched their identities around.

As you may notice, the offences leveled to each other are quite heavy. Though, while the offense exchanged offends the personage, the poet remains untouched and calmly smiling. For example, in line #2, Realdo greets the beginning of Altamante's

attack with a “Bravo”. He will wait and give the other time to finish, and then he will take his turn at offending. What is at stake is not actually losing face for having been offended, but losing face for not having been able to answer to the offense appropriately and destructively while following all the dictates of the genre. The public itself is very sensitive to the way emotions are displayed by the poets. They will laugh by hearth of the offense they give to each other, comment on the ability to effectively counter each of them. But the public will stop laughing when they will perceive that the rage is true.

The *Contrasti*’s complex structure has, ingrained in itself, the elements that make it so important in showing contested identities. It is its bipolar organization that always allows and requires that two opposite voices (or two opposite discourses) may be heard, and both in turn be attacked. Thus the *Contrasti* always present two sides of reality. More than that, they allow for a continuous affirmation and deconstruction of both of them. Ethnic identity in the *Contrasti* is always shifting, bipolar or multipolar, dual or multiple, and defined in opposition to others.

As Foucault reminds us, the establishment of power goes hand in hand with the capacity to obtain control over the definition of truth - transforming a particular discourse in a statement about reality (Foucault, 1978:89). In the *Contrasti* no truth is “a priori”, but each depends on the ability of the poet who defends it. Each is unstable, subjective and, especially, the result of the ability of the poet to impose his reality over the reality of the other poet. The *contrasti* mine at its root the sense of the absoluteness of a particular identity, showing to the public how it lays in the eye of the beholder. Identity becomes constructed, multiple, unstable.

As recent waves of immigration from other countries are changing forever the ethnic makeup of the Italian nation (and the political forces in Tuscany and Italy are trying to propose various master-narratives of identity), many Italians have started to interrogate themselves on their cultural and ethnic identities and on race. They are presented with the challenge of redefining their self and their identity in a more inclusive way.

While waging their ethnic wars with words, Realdo, Altamante and the other poets offer to their public the possibility to see the relativity, of ethnic divisions. What is important, is that we, the public, can laugh together over them, and as we listen to the



praises and the offenses, we reflect on the various sides of our selves. Tuscan people need their poets today more than ever, as it is testified by the renewed interest toward this ancient genre. They ask them to discuss new topics, such as “Prato vs. China”, that make sense only in the light of recent immigrations, and that witnesses to the need of making sense, of finding a place, in this case for the Chinese, in the constellation of relevant Tuscan identities. Once each portray has been in turn constructed and deconstructed, what the public is left with is, in Realdo’s closing verses, the final refuse of the individual to be bounded by birth or other IDs:

**“fin da i’ momento che siamo nelle fasce**

since the moment we are swaddled

**l’artista un si sa mai ndove nasce.”**

no one knows where the artist is born.

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