

LANDS I CAME TO SING: NEGOTIATING IDENTITIES AND PLACES IN THE TUSCAN “*CONTRASTO*”

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Abstract

This article on a genre of Tuscan Italian verbal art, the *Contrasto*, uses performance as a key to look at the connections between ethnic identity and place. The *Contrasto* takes its name, “contrast”, from its humorous representation of a verbal duel among entities, people or ideas. Structurally, it is formed by a series of chained Octets, in hendecasyllables. After an initial discussion of the current definitions of ethnic identity, the article is articulated in two parts. First, through the analysis of the “openings” of several *Contrasti*, I will show how a “repertoire” of ethnic identities becomes evident in the way the artists choose to represent themselves across contexts. These identities are connected to place. They are instead connected to towns, villages, valleys and mountains, monuments and historical events and legends. Tuscan ethnic identities emerge in the dialogue between the poets and their public. In the second part of the article, the in depth analysis of a *Contrasto* furnishes a key to understand how performance names and defines, but also contests, definitions of places and the associated identities. Performance brings to view the layers of complexity of ethnic identity, warning us against fixing and simplifying descriptions of it.

Keywords: performance, ethnic identity, place, Italy

1. Introduction¹

This paper explores the representation and negotiation of ethnic identity and place in verbal art performances, through the analysis of the *Contrasto* (pl. *Contrasti*), a Tuscan² Italian genre of sung improvised poetry. I show that these Tuscan poets use performance to create

¹ My analysis is based on my fieldwork in Tuscany between 1994 and 1998, where I spent a total of more than two years. My ethnographic method privileged participant observation, and I followed the artists in their performances, videotaping them. I also conducted interviews with them afterwards. The research itself was made possible by two grants I received from the Department of Anthropology, University of California Los Angeles.

² Tuscany is a region in central Italy, with 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 Lazio region to the south. Tuscany today is an economically prosperous and highly industrialized region. Culturally speaking, Tuscany is a transition area in which we find elements of Northern, Middle-European cultures and Southern, Mediterranean cultures. The Tuscan language includes many varieties (Giacomelli 1984/85). The language spoken in Pistoia, is the ‘Pistoiese, Occidental, Tuscan’ language. The language spoken in Florence, to the south-east of Pistoia, is the ‘Fiorentino Tuscan.’

images of the self and the other. Language is used to give shape to images of identity. Bauman defines performance as "a mode of communication, a way of speaking, the essence of which resides in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill" (1986: 3; see also Hymes 1981: 132). This display can lead to an enhancement of experience. Further, Bauman considers events themselves to be "abstractions from narratives" (1986: 5). Performance becomes a way of creating, not just representing, the past and social reality itself.

This conceptualization of performance leads to further implications. The idea of responsibility gives back to art its agency in society. Therefore, we can look at a particular form of verbal art, like poetry, as a form of social action. This is fundamental to an understanding of how the construction of identity, and the construction of images of ethnicity, happens in poetry. Bourdieu (1977, 1990) has already shown how reality is constructed in everyday practices. Following, I show how particular realities are emergent in (Tuscan) performance, and connected to places and placenames. The poetical *Contrasto* is improvised; it is made and unmade in the moment of performance, and only in the performance it acquires its social relevance. In the same fashion, there is a continuous making and unmaking of images in performances. These images are concretized and reflected in the innumerable repetition of their representation in everyday use of language in Tuscany, thus becoming continuously performed.

While working on the *Contrasti*, I started to realize that the definitions of ethnic identity found in anthropological theory were insufficient and unsatisfactory for looking at how Tuscans think about and construct their identities. The word "ethnic" also seemed inadequate. It became more obvious instead, that places, named places, were relevant.

The word *identity* is ambiguous. On one side, it refers to the person's perception of him or her self. On the other side, it refers to a process of external labeling, such as in the connected process of identification, or attribution of an I.D., of a particular place in a group and in a society. In this second sense, it becomes possible to talk about policies of identification, or categorization, of inclusion and exclusion, of establishment of borders and border-crossing³. "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*⁴. This model, as Kroskrity has noted, tends 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 this fixed definition, ethnicity is defined through boundaries. For example, Barth proposed considering ethnic groups as "categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves," (Barth 1969: 10). Those categories that a group regards as important (*diacritica of ethnicity*) will enter the definition of the boundaries. According to Barth, once the boundaries are established, movements of people through them and relative converging of cultural content between the groups will not diminish for the people involved the feeling

³ In this sense Visweswaran (1995) writes that: "Identities, no matter how strategically deployed, are not always chosen, but are in fact constituted by relations of power always historically determined" (1995: 8).

⁴ An example of such lists comes from the Random House College Dictionary: "*Ethnic Group*: A group of People of the same race or nationality who share a common and distinctive culture."

of belonging to different communities. Peterson Royce, aware of the presence of a duality in the concept of ethnic identity, proposed the concept of *double boundary*: "The boundary maintained from within, and the boundary imposed from outside" (1982: 29). 'Objective definitions' of ethnicity correspond to ascription of traits from outside; 'subjective definitions' refer to the internal, individual awareness of belonging to a group.

The risk here is to forget that the focus on boundaries is in itself an ideological choice, influenced by Western worldviews and historical events that stressed the importance of national borders, of contours, limits, and forms. The ideological attention on boundary maintenance defines people as people only as long as they remain inside an established boundary, and negates the humanity of those who refuse the boundary, those who trespass them. Cohen (1978) notices that every attempt to define an ethnic group by creating a boundary is artificial, and cannot account for the many *situational* transformations of ethnic identity and/or ethnic groups. The idea of situational ethnicity (Cohen 1978: 389) implies that it is constructed in interaction. The person will enact and communicate the particular ethnic identity of the ethnic group that is taken as referential in a given moment/context.

Theories of identity and ethnicity are not free from power relationships. The preference given to one model rather than another has political and social resonance. In Italy today, "traits" definitions are used by separatist movements, or associated with discriminatory statements against Southern Italians or recent immigrant groups⁵. They imply a desire to fix both the self and the "other" in a stable and stabilizing identity. For these reasons, I believe it is important to reaffirm the constructedness, the multiplicity, and the instability of social and ethnic identities. Only in this way, we can recover the *centrifugal* potential of identity and the space of free decisionality that it offers to the person as an agent.

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. This model is in agreement with the studies done by Kroskrity himself on the Arizona Tewa ethnic identity (1993), and with Zentella's ethnography on the New York Puerto Ricans (1990, 1997). Similar findings can be seen in the work of Duranti, Ochs and Ta'ase with the Samoan Americans in Los Angeles (1995). Similarly, I have discussed elsewhere the presence of a repertoire of identities in my work with the Italian American community in Los Angeles (Pagliai, 1995, 1996a, 1996b). See also Alzaldúa's writings on Chicano and Mexican American identities (1987). In all these cases, people can shift among different ethnic identifications. Since natural belonging to a group is no longer a necessary nor sufficient condition to present the self through it, how the presentation of self is achieved and why becomes the new question⁶. As I show below,

⁵ I cannot overstress the way in which "traits" definitions of Ethnicity are used as a base for ethnic hate crimes and discriminatory behaviors, such as the Holocaust and other attempted genocides. They can be seen at work today in the war between Serbs and Albanians.

⁶ This has also been seen as a problem in Rampton's recent study of language crossing (1998). Though Rampton's distinction between "interactive", "reactive" and "deracinated" ethnicity (with the connected idea of a "true" belonging versus "commodified" belonging) presupposes again the existence of an ethnic group outside or before people's creation of an identification to one (before its creation in everyday

in the *Contrasti* a repertoire of identities becomes evident in the way the artists choose to represent themselves across contexts.

As identities become contested and are negotiated in performance, so are places. In traditional scholarship on ethnicity a "place" is inhabited by a specific ethnic group (maybe a nation, a region, or more often a ghetto), fixed in the same way in which ethnic groups are seen as fixed and defined. However, the recognition of a repertoire of identities goes against the view of identity⁷ as stable/stabilizing. Instead, identities emerge only in the context in which they are performed⁸. Places are constituted through negotiations and re-negotiations (see Blu 1996: 198-99). Identities are connected to places, but places can shift. If not like the Wamirans stones, which move around at night (Kahn 1996: 181), they can shift in poetry, through the way the poets call on each of them.

Performance creates places, and places are continuously performed. In every word, in every encounter, we perform being Tuscan⁹, and we perform our belonging to places that are at the same time the depository of us being Tuscan. As the poets tell their stories, they contextualize them by recalling names of villages, cities, or particular features of the landscape. The answer of recognition by the audience defines a shared memory and knowledge. As Frake writes: "The use of placenames implicates much more than their denotation. In their phonological forms and their semantic suggestiveness, names often become remarkable - worthy of a story - in their own right" (1996: 238). Or, expressed in a parallel way by Vizenor, talking about Native American names and nicknames: "Native American Indian identities are created in stories, and names are essential to a distinctive personal nature" (1994: 56). Thus, acts of identity are also acts of naming, or renaming, where memory has been canceled.

Talking about placenames, Basso writes: "Because of their inseparable connection to specific localities, placenames may be used to summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations - associations of time and space, of history and events, of persons and social activities, of oneself and stages in one's life" (1988: 103). To give a name is to reconstruct the reality of an object into a dimension of belonging. Vizenor again writes (1994: 104):

"Nicknames are personal stories that would, to be sure, trace the individual in tribal families and communities rather than cause separations by personal recognition. Even so, nicknames and stories change, a condition that liberates personal identities from the melancholy of permanence."

Thus a metonymic chain connects names to stories, stories to memories, memories to places, and places to identities. Though, as Vizenor also warns us, stories change, and so do identities.

practices or shared participation into it). This is like presupposing a reality outside of its social construction. Here, Rampton does not seem to have done any theoretical progress and be still abiding to some kind of "trait/fixed" definition of ethnic group.

⁷ Here, I focus more on the "subjective" side of identity, although by no means I intend to negate the importance of looking at the "boundary imposed from the outside" (Peterson Royce 1982: 29).

⁸ This emergence, in turn, implies the contextual creation of a shared knowledge regarding the identity itself (its characteristics, boundaries, etc. including possible beliefs in fixed traits).

⁹ I include myself here, as I was born and grew up in Tuscany, in Pistoia.

2. The Tuscan context

The area where my research focused is the northeastern part of Tuscany and includes the provinces of Florence, Prato and Pistoia. Historically Florence has been the main cultural and political center of Tuscany. Prato was constituted as a province only in the 80s. Before the territory was part of the provinces of Florence and Pistoia. Both Prato and Pistoia were traditionally subject to the political control of Florence. Tuscany as a region has been characterized historically by periods of very high political fragmentation and internal divisions.

Provincial identities today in Tuscany are very strong. People tend to identify with the main town, the provincial capital, but also with their village and town and the particular area or valley, etc. These identifications may also create antagonisms. In general, Tuscan towns have been traditionally antagonistic to each other. This antagonism is usually dated back, by the people themselves, to the medieval ages, the time when Tuscany was divided into city-states¹⁰.

The term used to describe this situation, in Italy, is *campanilismo*. This term, which has no translation in English (the Webster suggests 'parochialism' but this, I believe, is incorrect), is semantically very similar to the term *nazionalismo*, 'nationalism,' to which indeed it is compared in conversations in Italy. Nationalism implies an allegiance to a nation, and a series of associated feelings of pride, of belonging, of common history, etc. - but nationalism is also associated with national expansion, encroachments, colonialism, war and domination. The first series of meanings can also describe the term *campanilismo*, with one difference: The focus is not on the nation, but on the city, the town, and the village. In fact the term etymologically derives from the word *campanile*, 'bell tower' (we could think of a translation as 'bell-tower-ism'), and makes a clear reference to what could be considered an ubiquitous landmark in Italy: The tower of the main church of the city, town or village.

In Tuscany *campanilismo* takes up also, in part, the second series of meanings of the word "nationalism": The memory of the city-state of medieval times, when "*non c'era posto indoe un facessen guerra*" ('there was no place that wasn't at war' - verse from a traditional sung poem in octets, "*Pia dei Tolomei*"). Notice the word *posto*, namely 'place,' in this verse. Antagonisms among villages and towns today have lost any violent side, although many elders in Tuscany still remember that rivalries leading to violence were still a common happening at the beginning of the century. The poet Realdo Tonti, for example, recalls that:

"*Campanilismo* is like this. In the past, among towns and towns, I don't know; here, when I was a boy, if a young man would pass the limit to go to San Niccoló, if he would pass a certain limit he would find himself hit with stones. You know, the ignorance. Maybe he was in love with a girl of that town, and then it was even worse. The evening when he would go in that town, they would do him the worst tricks. It is the same with *campanilismo*. It was like this in the towns. To you it may sound something difficult to believe. ... You are young. ... Yes, at the beginning of this century, but even until the war. Even until the 1930, 1935. ... There was *campanilismo* between San Piero and San Niccoló, San Michele. That was better, because there was the soccer team, you understand; here

¹⁰ Although the antagonism could possibly date back further to the Etruscan time. In fact, it is now known that the Etruscans were also organized in city-states.

there was the music band. The music band of San Niccoló was better than the one of San Pietro, and so on. It was like this. Then there were *Contrasti*. ... Better, the Poeti a Braccio would win their bread with it."¹¹

This phenomenon is in some way similar to what Blu describes for the towns in Carolina (1996).

The antagonism is today only expressed in jokes and blasons, rarely offensive. Blasons are particular forms of stereotyping in which the stereotype is known and accepted by both the in-group and the out-group, and which are defined through oppositions. Thus an identification as *pianigiano*, 'plains person', will recall the relevant opposition, namely *montanino* or 'mountain person'. Blasons are very common in Tuscany and practically every town and village has its own, as shown by the studies of scholars like De Simonis (1984/85), Pecori (1975) and Cortellazzo (1984). 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 other¹².

Talking about "ethnic identity" is not a common Tuscan experience. I doubt that most people would even understand what the terms mean. As Tamanoi writes of Japanese rural women: "Perhaps they had many identities or none at all; 'identity' is just not the way they talk about their living histories" (1998: 207-8). Conversations about places, instead, are continuous. The names, the roads to get there, the way people talks "there" and "here", together with innumerable acts of placing people, making sense of their actions, reckoning their *razza* ('race,' but in the Tuscan meaning of 'family ancestry'). "*Che razza di gente enno lá a X?*" ('What kind of people are those in X?') They will ask me when I come back from the United States. As I shrug my shoulders in the impossibility of an answer, they will answer with the proverb: "*Tutto il mondo é paese*" ('the entire world is a town,' or 'the entire world is made out of towns').

In the performance of the *Contrasto*, the articulation of "repertoires" of ethnic identities depends on several factors, including the context, the audience, the negotiated meaning of the event, and the individuality of the artists. All of these factors, in turn, come to be reshaped by the performance itself. As Bauman has shown,

"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).

In the *Contrasto*, identity itself can be seen as emerging in performance. The analysis of this genre, thus, underlines the active role of the individual in choosing and enacting a "repertoire" of identities.

¹¹ Excerpts from an interview conducted in Realdo Tonti's home, in Agliana, on June 18, 1997.

¹² Important oppositional identities in the area under study are the one between the city and the countryside. For example, Florence versus the rest of its province, the plains versus the mountain, and the juxtaposition between Pistoia and Prato. These are also reflected in several *Contrasti*.

3. Structure of the *Contrasto*

The *Contrasto* takes its name, 'contrast', from the fact that two different figures, ideas, or things are depicted in it. Each is in turn defended and attacked, in an attempt to demonstrate the general inferiority of the one and superiority of the other. Thus, the *Contrasto* is a dialogue with the tendency to become a "duel". 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. The topics treated in a *Contrasto* vary and are potentially limitless. *Contrasti* between various Tuscan cities are common, as well as those involving political figures, gender distinctions and social roles¹³.

The *Contrasti* are performed by artists called *Poeti Bernescanti*¹⁴, or simply *poeti*, 'poets.' The structure is quite complex. The *Contrasti* are formed by a series of chained octets, where the first six verses have an alternated rhyme (example 1, line 1-6), while the last two have a "coupled" rhyme (example 1, lines 7-8). Each of the verses in the octet must be formed by 11 syllables¹⁵ (example 1, line 1). The poets use different varieties of the Tuscan dialect and code-switch among them. The "poetic language" also allows a high degree of semantic and grammatical creativity¹⁶.

(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 am <u>or</u> i |
| | oh, that is the land of loves |
| 3-A | doe si coltivano cose-e molto r <u>ar</u> e |
| | where the rarest things are cultivated |
| 4-B | o specialmente delle rose e f <u>ior</u> i |
| | and especially roses and flowers |
| 5-A | o li non avrai delusioni am <u>ar</u> e |

¹³ 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 poets. When three poets are present, themes can be proposed that require the expression of three different points of view and thus three participants.

¹⁴ Literally 'poets in Berni's style,' after F. Berni, a Tuscan writer of the 16th century who is supposed to have first used this kind of poetry in its modern form. The poets are also called *poeti a braccio*, 'poets at arms.' The meaning and origins of this second name is obscure.

¹⁵ I believe that the number of syllables in each verse depends on the way it is performed. The melody, for example, allows a multiplication of the syllables through pausing, division of the diphthongs, elision, or melodic prolongation of vowels.

¹⁶ The language of the *Contrasti* disparages and ignores the common rules governing grammar and phrase formation in Italian. The prominence given to the sound, to the internal organization of the genre itself against the external organization/constraints 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, often through assonance of meaning. Word use follows the needs of musicality as well, even the music is more important than the semantic meaning.

- 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.

4. Tuscan identities as connected to place: Places named

In the *Contrasto*, the contestation of each other's presentation and claim of identity passes through the metonymic association of the person (self and other) with places. These places can be named, hinted at, evoked through metaphors, and they are actively constructed and deconstructed. The act of naming, then, in verbal art performance, becomes fundamental and can furnish a key to understand a Tuscan vision of things. The Tuscan repertoire of identities could be articulated in a series of places, to which the person can claim or be claimed as belonging. Belonging itself, in turn, is articulated in terms of "knowing" or "being known", naming or being named. Names then become part of the way the claiming gets done.

At the beginning of a performance, the poets usually sing a series of "opening octets" in which they introduce themselves and greet the public. While they introduce themselves, the poets situate (identify) themselves each time in relation to the audience, the setting, and the other poet(s) present. This is the first of a series of layers of identity that they portray and of which they are invested during the *Contrasti* (often indissolubly mixed as well with their own identities 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, I focus on the conscious verbal self-identification in the opening octets. It is here, in fact, that we can see the connection between place-names and identity. The poets rarely present themselves as "being Tuscan" in their songs. Identity instead is connected to towns, villages, valleys and mountains, monuments and historical events and legends.

The poets whose performances I will discuss here are Altamante Logli and Realdo Tonti. Both of them are renowned and expert poets. Altamante lives in Scandicci, in the province of Florence. Realdo, a middle-aged man, lives in Agliana, in the province of Pistoia. Realdo is all in his name (lit. 'king Aldo'), regal. He could have been a king of ancient times, a tall and big man, with a powerful voice. He is also a kind person, down to earth and ready to accord you a benevolent smile. I was captured very soon by his continuous effort at introspection, his frequent bending on himself, and the incredible depth of his mind. Altamante is a seventy-eight year old man with the energy of a child, and of a child at times the temper. A short man with small penetrating eyes and a smile that makes you wonder if he is really fooling you about something. He is a little man, with a heart big like the world, that I could not avoid to love at first sight. Good natured and mellow, he becomes a true tiger on the stage, a poet with a fast and aggressive tongue that can give quite a bit of trouble to any adversary.

Schema #1, Altamante's Repertoire of Identities:

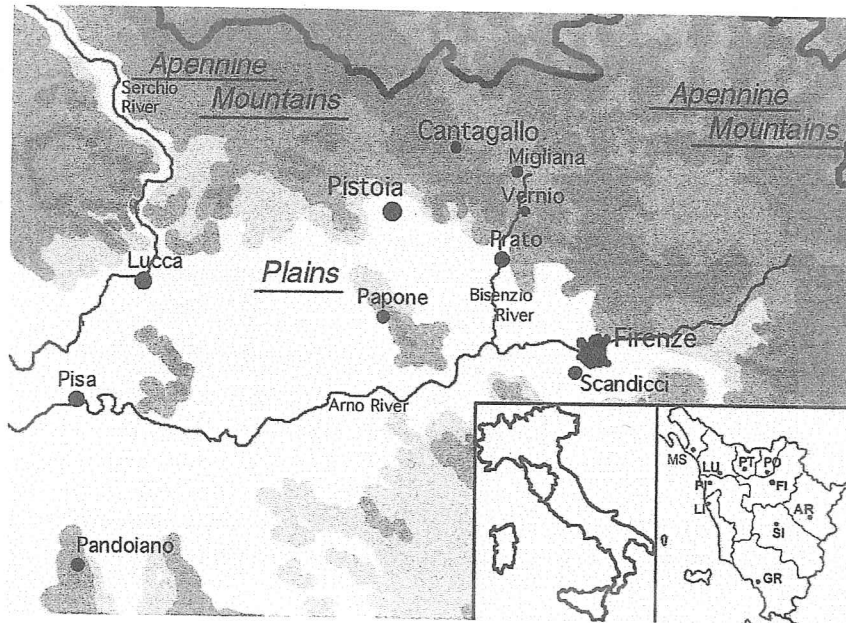
<i>Repertoire of Identities</i>	<i>Place where he has invoked them</i>	<i>Setting</i>
Apennine Mountains, Mountains, Cantagallo (town, province of Pistoia, Apennine mountains), Migliana	- Migliana (town, province of Prato, on the Apennine mountains)	- Local feast
Florence (city)	1) Papone (village, southern part of the province of Pistoia) 2) Lido di Pandoiano (village, province of Livorno)	1) Festival of Liberation ¹⁷ 2) Local traditional feast
Scandicci (town, province of Florence), Tuscan	- Florence	- Festival of the ARCI ¹⁸
Political identities: Communist	- Papone	- Festival of Liberation

As shown in Schema #1, Altamante identified himself, in different performances, alternatively as Florentine, from Migliana, from Scandicci, from Cantagallo, from the Apennines, etc. (see also map #1). Only once he identified himself as Tuscan, during a performance in Florence, notably at an event organized by a national association, the ARCI (Italian Recreational and Cultural Association). He would otherwise refer to the particular Tuscan sub-groups or sub-cultures¹⁷.

Naming indexes local knowledge. It affirms the presence of a relationship. The poets call in places as witnesses of their ability to belong to those places/identities. If they can name places, they can say that they are part of them, that they have that identity¹⁸. The identity declared by the other poet is also relevant. Usually poets tend to propose different identifications from each other. Thus, when singing with Realdo, Altamante would rather not declare himself from Pistoia. This seems to set the base for subsequent oppositional role-taking.

¹⁷ Of course, this might have been different if he had found himself outside of Tuscany (he performed many times in Lazio 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 Lazio, whose performance was recorded in Tuscany. Mariani actually never presented a Lazio identity, but rather his sub-cultural group in Lazio. He also declared himself akin to the Tuscan people.

¹⁸ This idea I share with Sepa Sete, since it was formed through a dialogue with her.



The connection that the Tuscan poets build with their audience through their performance is fundamental. It is important to understand the audience as co-performers. Artists and audience influence each other, and both a reflective and reflexive relationship is established among them. The audience usually requests the particular topic of the *Contrasto*. They may furnish various kinds of feedback, including evaluations, interpretations (see also Fretz 1987: 306-307), laughing and applause. They can even address the poets in rhyme¹⁹. The fact that the poets often insist on participation, on the

¹⁹ The audience is not homogeneous, but there are various kinds of audiences, and each of them can have a different role in respect to the performance (Goodwin 1986). Moreover the people in the audience have an influence on each other's performance as audience (Goodwin 1986). The audience can also be divided into "supporters" and "antagonists" in respect to the performance.

possibility for everyone to "take the microphone", on the "we are here for you, to do what you ask us to do", is enlightening.

The performance is created in the interaction between speaker and listeners, and through this interaction, a certain social reality is upheld or criticized; a certain representation of identity can be legitimated or de legitimated. According to Heritage (1984), an objective reality exists so far as people agree on it. It is the ability of the poets in performance to obtain the agreement of the audience on the identities that they portray themselves or about themselves, that makes the poets part of their public. The identification can be contested, as I will show later. The point is that it is in the moment that the people accept the poets as part of them that the poets become able to express the audience's voice. The people recognize the poets and thus recognize the poets' ability to express Tuscan voices. They recognize the poets by accepting the performance and by co-constructing it. As Georges writes: "Everything human beings say and do when they assume the contrastive, but complementary, communicative roles of narrator and listener is an integral part of the event generated by their interacting; and this includes what they say or do in terms of such identities as those rooted in their sex, age, religious affiliation, ethnicity, occupations, etc." (1981: 251). Thus, the Tuscan ethnic identities and the communities to which they refer are *imagined* in the dialogue between the poets and their public.

The poet portrays the identity that allows him to feel closer to the audience. For example, in Migliana (see schema #1) 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 Communist (see schema #1). This declaration of affiliation to the audience is revealing. These artists are not "heroic" figures. They escape from the hegemonic definition of the artist as hero; they share the same life, problems, unsettling questions, common sense, or limits of their audience. They do not stand out against the background of their communities, but find in their communities their strength and their voices. The relationship of the Tuscan poets with their audiences situates them close to the heart of the social network.

5. Place and identity as performed

In performance, the poets contest places and their definitions. Places are constructed and reconstructed in the *Contrasto* (see Blu 1996: 199). Metaphors of places overlap through the octets like realities overlap over the landscape (Blu 1996). Places (towns) become contested sources of identification, discursively constructed, thus pointing at contestable, unstable and contested identities.

I now turn to the analysis of a short excerpt from a *Contrasto*, done toward the end of the performance in Papone²⁰ (8th of August 1997). The context was a Festival of Liberation, taking place in the large courtyards of the local *Casa del Popolo* ('house of the

²⁰ Papone is a village near the town of Lamporecchio, in the province of Pistoia, but very close to the border with the Florence province, and separated from Pistoia by a chain of Hills, the San Baronto. It is also high country, over the hills themselves.

people'). At the northern side of the building, there was a large paved space where, in other evenings, dances would be held. On one side stood a small stage erected for the occasion, and paraded with red Communist flags. This stage was used for musical groups, theater, political speakers, or other performances. At the other side of the paved dance ground, under the trees or along the side of the building, were the lines of the chairs where the audience sat. From the bar inside the building, voices and noises of dishes being washed created a droning accompaniment to the poets' singing.

The performance had started quite late, around 10pm. In part for this reason, the audience was smaller than usual. The *Contrasto* I am analyzing was the last done, toward 11:30pm, when there was even less audience left (about 45-50 people). Because of it, the poets were getting ready to quit their rather short performance (usually performances run more than two hours). The remaining audience had been instead requesting to hear something more. The *Contrasto* started as a "closing octet" (the octet used to close a performance), then developed into a *Contrasto* of "plains vs. mountains" and then "city vs. countryside." The poets' indecision may explain why they start the closing octets, but then they end up doing another *Contrasto*.

In this *Contrasto* (spanning over 21 octets), 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 (see map #1), where he lives. Realdo also evokes the travel back to the plains (where Pistoia is located). At this point, Altamante produces a third octet attacking Pistoia (octet #3):

(Octet #3) ALTAMANTE²¹

- 1 *Torna a s- Pistoia lá in quell'accquazione*
Go back to Pistoia, there, in that stormy downpour
- 2 Realdo: <He! Ho! Ora comincia (vai)!>²²
He! Ho! Now you start (go on)!

²¹ The following transcription conventions apply:
 (words in parenthesis) = words are in parenthesis when their transcription is unsure.
 (.....) = words I cannot hear and transcribe.
 ((double parenthesis)) = indicate production of specified sound by the speaker or audience, including applause and laughing.
 [] or [= square brackets indicate overlapping between two different speakers.
 < > = laughter from the audience overlapping the speaker's words or singing.
 AUD = audience
 AUD? = unknown person in the audience
 Notice that I transcribe sentences spoken by other than the singer by indenting them and indicating the name of the speaker, followed by a colon. These sentences are also numbered, although they are not part of the octet.

²² Note the audience's laughing answer to Altamante's first verse. It underlines the passage from the closing octets to a new *Contrasto*, at the same time recognizing and encouraging it.

- 3 *torna lá nel mezzo ai <gineprai>*²³
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
AUD?: ()
- 6 *c'è 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 forza sí di mosche e di zanzare.*
by force, indeed, of flies and of mosquitoes
- 10 AUD: ((laughing))
- 11 AUD?: [(*e infatti*) *ce l'ho*]
(and in fact) I have them²⁴
- 12 AUD?: [Ha! Ha! Ha ha ha ha!]

Notice that Altamante uses characteristics of the environment, its rainy and humid weather, and recalls the fact that in the past the area had malaria (line 6: The infection). Belonging to Pistoia, thus, is metonymically connected to sickness. The verses evoke ugly weather, unhealthy waters, and a general sense of a place where you cannot avoid feeling uncomfortable: The tangles of bushes become tangles of walls: Ravines and an inhospitable place. A place where people live in fear, where the days are bitter in the continuous siege of the mosquitoes (themselves carriers of malaria) and the flies.

The harshness of Altamante's attack is proportional to the authenticity of the portrait. Talking about Kaluli songs, Feld writes: "Its evocative power depends not on the quantity of detail of places named, but on their connectedness, on the extent to which they map a place narrative that emotionally resonates with personal, biographical, and historical self-consciousness" (1996: 125). Notice, for example, the comment from a person in the audience (line 11), confirming the presence of flies and mosquitoes. The plains used to be a swamp. They were slowly drained over almost two thousand years by the peasants. Pistoia's original hamlet was built on the swamp itself, like a pile-dwelling. The name, Pistoia, comes from the Latin "pistores", people stamping their feet, making the land solid with that movement. It evokes to me the image of an unstable soil, continuously on the verge of sinking back in the swamp from which it was stolen. Altamante's derision of such an effort creates a powerful attack, and evokes powerful memories. Realdo defends Pistoia and attacks Scandicci in turn. In doing so, he creates another powerful image of Pistoia:

(#4) REALDO

- 1 *C'è le bellezze vedi le piú rare*
There are the beauties, you see, the most rare
- 2 *o quella l' è la tera degli amori*

²³ Literally, *gineprai* means 'bushes of juniper', but it is generally used in its idiomatic sense of 'troubles from which it is difficult to extricate oneself.'

²⁴ Referring to the presence of flies and mosquitoes, very common in summer.

- o, that is the land of loves
 3 *doe si coltivano cose-e molto rare*
 where the rarest things are cultivated
 4 *o specialmente delle rose e fiori*
 and especially roses and flowers
 5 *o li non avrai delusioni amare*
 o there you will not have bitter delusions
 6 *o dove che si incontrano gli amori*
 where loves are encountered
 7 *invece te che abiti a Scandicci*
 instead you, living in Scandicci
 8 *e tu ti trovi sempre ne pasticci.*
 you always find yourself in a mess.
 9 AUD: (((scattered applause))
 10 AUD: (((laughing))
 11 AUD?: (.....)

Realdo cancels the image of a painful past with that of a prosperous present. After the Second World War, there were many changes in the cultivation of the Pistoiese plains. The end of the sharecropping economy was associated with the development of nurseries. The humid climate makes the plains an ideal place for the production of flowers and ornamental plants. In Realdo's verses, these flowers that cover the land become a symbol of love. Suddenly, Pistoia is a sunny colorful heaven. As Blu writes: "How the land is to be construed, interpreted, and used is very much a matter of negotiation and often contestation" (1996: 198).

The land as constructed resonates and indexes realities of economic change and exploitation. The layers of human activity over the soil of the plains: The slow draining of the swamps, the cultivation, and then the recent changes that brought to the construction of the nurseries that today bless Pistoia with flowers, money and cancer (from the chemical pesticides used). Old illnesses and new ones: In the performance, the history of our Tuscan land passes in front of us audience. Each verse is a memory.

Scandicci, in turn, is an industrial town that boomed after the Second World War from a small agricultural center; today it is fused with Florence and constitutes one of its suburban areas. Although Realdo does not describe Scandicci, the single mention at the end of the description of Pistoia already hints at the juxtaposition between the beauty of Pistoia and the ugliness of Scandicci. The juxtaposition is all in one word, the "instead" that opens the two final verses. But Altamante, instead of picking up the challenge of defending Scandicci, proposes for himself a new identity as "mountain person" (*Montanino*), an inhabitant of the Apennine mountains:

(#5) ALTAMANTE

- 1 *Ma -o son- ((coughing)) son venuto da le castagne e ricci*
 But I came from the chestnuts and the husks²⁵
 2 *dove nasce i Bbisenzio sopra l'Appennino*

²⁵ The Chestnut trees that cover the Apennine Mountains, are an important symbol for the people living in them. They also furnished an important staple food. The chestnuts are gathered and cooked in various ways or ground to make flour, from which a sweet bread is done.

- where the Bisenzio River²⁶ is born over the Appenine
- 3 AUD: ((laughing))
- 4 *l'acqua colava giù da que' renicci*
the water was dripping down from those sliding sand deposits
- 5 *e ti bagnó i' ssolo poverino*
and soaked your soil poor one²⁷
- 6 *voglio vedere ome ti tu spicci*
I want to see how you can unstick yourself
- 7 *son nato fra la ch- fra i ccastagno e i' biancospino*
I was born between the chestnut tree and the hawthorn
- 8 *a Pistoia tu fa' di' mmormorio*
in Pistoia you make murmurs/grumble
- 9 *tu bevi l'acqua dove piscio io*
you drink the water where I piss
- 10 AUD: ((laughing))
- 11 AUD: ((scattered applause))

This switch leads the confrontation from one between Pistoia and Scandicci, to one between the Mountains and the Plains. Here, naming is substituted by metaphors, which in turn presuppose common knowledge, or common memories. To the cultivated flowers of the plains, Altamante juxtaposes the wild flowers and trees of the mountains. The pure, running water of the Bisenzio River, decaying in its downward movement, becomes the polluted, motionless waters of the plains. Notice how the effectiveness of the poetry lays in great part in the ability to isolate the core elements of each construction of place, and attack those elements.

In the following octets (#6 through #13, not presented here), Realdo attacks the Mountain people in turn, identifying Altamante with the town of Cantagallo (see map #1). Altamante then attacks Pistoia. Later (octets #14 through #21) Realdo shifts the theme by associating Pistoia with Florence, thereby contrasting the city with the countryside, and ends up claiming a Florentine identity. Thus in the end the poets switch their initial identifications around. The switch does not happen without opposition from Altamante. This can be seen better by looking at three octets (#14, #15 and #18) where Realdo starts (#14) and then completes (#18) the switch:

(#14) REALDO

- 1 *<Si vede l'ignorante [come é scortese]>*
it can be seen how the ignorant is impolite
- 2 AUD: ((laughing))
- 3 Altamante: *[ndiamo si va via (.....). Ora un vó via piú]*
come on, let's go away (.....). Now I won't go away anymore
- 4 *tu l'ha messa la firma di mmontanaro*
you put your signature as hillbilly
- 5 *<guardatevi intorno> nel nostro paese*
look around in our country
- 6 *ndove gli é un'arte di ppiú raro*
where there is an art of the the most rare
- 7 *voglio dí di Firenze, i ppistoiese*

²⁶ See map #1.

²⁷ The swampy plains receive their waters from the Apennine Mountains.

- I mean to say about Florence, the area of Pistoia
 8 Altamante: (che c'entra) Firenze (.....)
 (what does) Florence (have to do with it) (.....)
 9 *e ora tu lo ngolli [boccone²⁸ amaro*
 and now you will swallow a bitter pill
 10 Altamante: [(parlá di Firenze) (.....)]
 (to talk about Florence) (.....)
 11 *dimmi te i piazza di ddomo e i Bbargello*
 tell me, the plaza of the cathedral and the Bargello²⁹
 12 *un tu gl' ha visti ncima a Diavello*
 you did not see them on top of Diavello³⁰
 13 AUD: ((laughing))
 14 AUD?: (bravo)
 15 AUD: ((scattered applause))

Realdo starts by labeling Altamante as an ignorant hillbilly. This is the first part of what is going to be shown soon as a dichotomy between the uncivilized country-folk versus the civilized urbanite. In fact, immediately after, Realdo addresses the public asking them to look around themselves, to notice the artistic heritage of the region. Notice that he uses the pronoun "ours" together with the term *paese*, namely 'country' or 'town,' thus theorizing a unit that includes him (as Pistoiese) as well as the audience (Papone is situated between the provinces of Pistoia and Florence) in this address. Then in the fourth verse he makes explicit reference to Florence and Pistoia. By mentioning Florence, he is presenting the second term of the dichotomy: The urban space. The closure is highly humorous: The beauty of art, symbolized by the cathedral and the museum of Bargello, cannot be found on top of a mountain. The answer of the audience is one of roaring laughing and approval ("Bravo" in line 14).

Notice that Altamante, at the mentioning of Florence, starts objecting (lines 8 and 10). As an experienced poet, I think he already knows what is coming. Claiming Florence is to claim a powerful ally, especially when the association is done through art. More than a Tuscan capital, Florence is often felt by Tuscans as a world capital of art. As such, it is the homeplace of all poetry. To claim Florence is to empower one's poetical ability. Altamante at this point is left with the alternative of attacking Florence, or refusing Realdo's claim to a Florentine identification. He chooses the second possibility:

(# 15) ALTAMANTE

- 1 AUD: (((still laughing after previous octet))
 2 *[Ma sentite i cche dice sto zimbello³¹*
 But listen what he is saying this laughing stock
 3 AUD: ((laughing))
 4 *<vo mettere> Pistoia con Fiorenza*

²⁸ *Boccone* literally means 'mouthful of food' or 'bite of food.'

²⁹ The museum of Bargello, one of the most important in Florence.

³⁰ This reference to Diavello is only partially clear to me. It seems that he is referring to a mountaintop with that name. Unfortunately, I do not know its exact location.

³¹ *Zimbello* literally a 'decoy,' often a bird or in the shape of a bird.

- he wants to compare Pistoia with Florence
 5 *io dio gli é malato ni ccervello*
 I say that he is sick in the brain
 6 *oppure gli ha poca <intelligenza>*
 or he has little intelligence
 7 AUD: ((laughing))
 8 *io parlavo d'i mmonte morto bello*
 I was talking of the mountain very beautiful
 9 *indoe gli é nato la mia residenza*
 where it was born my residence
 10 *se porto un pistoiese in piazza Signoria*
 if I bring a pistoiese in the Signoria Plaza³²
 11 *l'acchiappahani se lo porta via.*
 the dog-catcher would carry him away.
 12 AUD?: [Nooo! ((laughing))]
 13 AUD: [((lots of laughing))]
 14 AUD: ((applause))
 15 AUD?: (tu sta' in filo) (gli attacca) Pistoia, é?
 (you are in trouble) (he is attacking) Pistoia, right?

Altamante bases his attack on the presupposed impossibility/absurdity to make a comparison between Pistoia and Florence. He thus reinterprets Realdo's attempt to build an association as an attempt to make a confrontation. Then, he re-establishes his own claim to talk of the beauty of the mountain: Since he was born there he can claim residence -- thus he can speak for it. In turn, the claim of a Pistoiese to talk for Florence is derided: Like a dog in the central plaza of Florence, less than human, carried away like a madman. Altamante thus contests Realdo's right to "name" Florence, to call the city as witness to his argument. The negotiation of identity happens on multiple levels: The construction of the image, and the claim of belonging. Altamante also escalates the violence of his attack, to which the audience answers in various ways. They laugh and applaud (lines 3, 4, 6, 7, 13), but they also express recognition of the strength of the attack (line 12), or seem to comment on Realdo's position (line 15). In the next two octets (#16 and #17, not presented here), Realdo reaffirms his allegiance to the plains, and Altamante again contests the possibility of an association with Florence. Then, in the third octet, Realdo brings about his strongest argument:

(#18) REALDO

- 1 AUD?: *Ovvìa!*
 2 That's it!
 3 *Ecco tu l'ha scoperte[] <le tue carte>*
 There! You have discovered your cards/hand
 4 Altamante: *[ndiamo si va via per Dio]*
 let's go away, by God!
 5 *se se' nato laggiù sull'Appennino*
 if you were born far there on the Apennine
 6 *io nacqui lo sai da un'antra parte*
 I was born you know in another place
 7 *vicino a i ssolo quello fiorentino*

³² Florence's central plaza, where are the Museum of *Palazzo Vecchio* 'Old Palace,' the connected Uffizzi Museum, the Loggia of Orcagna, and the Marzocco Fountain.

series of cultural personae, each in turn representing a particular version of the world. These personifications are not just constructed in performance but co-constructed in the dialogue between the artists and with the audience. The audience relinquishes or bestows on the artists the power to speak for them, about them, and especially from them (as part of them). This co-construction is the base for the establishment of a reflexive relationship between artists and audience. A reflexive relationship in which portrayals of the essence of particular social identities are offered (presented) and at the same time attacked, praised, derided, offended, deconstructed, reorganized and *imagined*. The audience, through their co-performance can accept, refuse, negotiate those images. Bauman affirms that "Performance is formally reflexive - signification about signification. ... Performance may be seen as broadly metacultural, a cultural means of objectifying and laying open to scrutiny culture itself, for culture is a system of systems of signification". (1992: 47). Each poet disturb the constructed objectivity of the portrayal of identity proposed by the other. The *Contrasti* are powerful, also because one poet is always going to shake the reality that the other poet is constructing.

As people share the same places, they can have different definitions of them. Each of these definitions implies a reality, so that realities are overlapping. Tuscan places are created historically; they are sediments in these definitions of places. There are layers to Tuscan places. The poets actively deploy each of these layers in their presentation of different definitions of the same places. Not every Tuscan shares the same definitions of the places they live in. It is this non-sharing that the performances underline. They lay bare the contradictions, but they do so with a smile. They challenge the ability of Tuscans to say "this is our place," and they invite the audience to join them on a more complex level of thinking.

Having shown the importance of "place" in the definition of identity, I stated that places are also "performed", or emergent in performance. As Casey notices, "places not only *are*, they *happen*" (1996: 27, italics in the original). As the landscape is constituted in speech acts, the connection between the landscape and peoples is also constituted (see Basso 1996: 54). "Thus represented and enacted" writes Basso, "places and their meaning are continuously woven into the fabric of social life" (1996: 57). This also implies that performance allows play with each other's reality, a game that can be highly destructive, as the duel of the *Contrasto* can be destructive. Poets offend and humiliate each other as well as their audiences. The freedom of rethinking our selves is not (and maybe cannot be) free from a bit of prickly pain, that at times may make us grind our teeth in the middle of a laugh. Then, would the absence of that sting make us happier, or just more bored and dull people?

6. Conclusions

The *Contrasti's* complex structure has, ingrained in itself, the elements that make it so important in showing contested identities. Its bipolar organization allows and requires that two opposite voices (or two opposite discourses) may be heard, and both in turn be attacked. Thus, ethnic identity in the *Contrasti* is always shifting, bipolar or multipolar, dual or multiple, and defined in opposition to others. 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 is revealed as constructed, multiple, unstable.

As recent waves of immigration are changing the ethnic makeup of the Italian nation, many Italians have started to interrogate themselves on their cultural and ethnic identities. The arrival of immigrants is often seen as the moment of starting, the cause of the overlapping of different realities on the landscape. I have tried to show that the overlapping has always been present. It is part of the way people construct their vision of things, not just a phenomenon of modernity or postmodernity. It is not something due to supposed anomic conditions of present times. The contradictions do not take place on a substrata that once was uncontradictory (the pristine unity of one people). Recognizing the necessity of the overlapping of realities, then, can be a first step toward creating new memories together, landmarks that bear our joint names. An old view is still lurking in the background, one that would like to see a happy state in the absence of diasporas and displacements. However, displacement can be a powerful strategy, and the contestation of place can be done with a smile. The Tuscan poets continuously deplace, replace and emplace themselves. By doing this they augment their power. Deplacing and re-emplacing are strategies that create the universality of a certain discourse; they are strategies of power and empowerment.

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 about 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 shown by the renewed interest in this ancient genre. They ask the poets to discuss new topics that witness to the need of making sense, of finding a place for other cultures in the constellation of relevant Tuscan identities. Once each portrayal has been in turn constructed and deconstructed, what the public is left with is, in Realdo's closing verses (Octet #20), the final refusal 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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