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FASCISM, POPULISM, AND THE MYTH OF THE ORIGINS IN 20TH CENTURY US LITERATURE

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Is it true that long ago firemen put fires out instead of going to start them?
(Bradbury 20).

This essay examines the significance of the American Revolution as a literary trope and a rhetorical device in shaping US political imagination. The Revolution fostered both utopian and dystopian rationales, justifying radical experiences such as fascism. I will examine this relevance in Nathanael West's *A Cool Million* (1934) and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935).

Keywords: American Revolution, Fascism, Dystopia, Nathanael West, Sinclair Lewis

Fascismo, populismo e il mito delle origini nella letteratura americana contemporanea.
Il saggio analizza il ruolo della Rivoluzione americana come tropo letterario e strategia retorica nella formazione dell'immaginario politico statunitense. La Rivoluzione ha alimentato logiche sia utopiche sia distopiche, sfociando in derive radicali come il fascismo. Saranno qui esaminati *A Cool Million* (1934) di N. West e *It Can't Happen Here* (1935) di S. Lewis.

Parole chiave: Rivoluzione americana, fascismo, distopia, Nathanael West, Sinclair Lewis

Introduction

According to Michael Kammen, the American Revolution constitutes the most powerful source for the formation of a US national tradition. Kammen criticizes Edward Shils' view on national traditions, according to which «even though they undergo radical change during a crisis period, they settle back into an approximation to their previous pattern» (Shils 158). Instead, Kammen argues

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that generalizations of this sort cannot apply to the complex cultural history of the American Revolution which, in fact, «has evolved and altered markedly since 1776» (8). Starting from these premises, I wish to challenge the capacity of elements of a tradition to «settle back», thus arguing that even the most crystallized and sacral components of a national mythology can transform and deviate from their original formulation beyond a point of no return. Both arguments are encapsulated in Ray Bradbury's words in the epigraph: in *Fahrenheit 451*, Clarissa McClellan is not simply inquiring about a factual difference between past and present, she is also asking Guy Montag about the conceptual distance between two different ideological rationales, problematizing a situation in which the same notion («firemen») can adapt to oppositional logics, one negating the other.

This essay wishes to replace the symbolic role of fire as both signified and signifier with the cultural position of the American Revolution, showing how its meaning can be reversed to a negation of the original principles of freedom and emancipation that characterized the revolutionary struggle. The purpose of this operation is to show the extreme extent to which such a symbol can acquire and embody a range of new significations, including a connection with fascism. The latter is identifiable through some narrative and rhetorical devices that were similarly operational in both experiences – The American Revolution and fascism – to achieve popular legitimization, despite the distance that separates the two historical backgrounds.

Populism and myth

To dissect this counterintuitive combination, I will resort to the notion of populism declined in its rhetorical dimension, which constitutes a point of contact between the Revolution and fascism. On the one hand, the relationship between fascism and populism has proved solid (Finchelstein); on the other hand, traces of populism emerged during the Revolution as well. For example, Ronald P. Formisano and Jeremy Engels recognize several populist communicative strategies and practices in independentist propaganda, especially when «naming someone to play the role of the enemy» (Engels 21) or constructing the notion of "people", as «not something of the nature of an ideological expression, but a real relation between social agents,» as Ernesto Laclau would have it (73). These and other rhetorical strategies defined a «template» (Formisano 44) that inspired later phases of US history and are well recognizable in the populist rhetorical apparatuses of other experiences beyond the US, such as Nazism in Germany or fascism in Italy.

As anticipated, *Fahrenheit 451* provides part of this essay's conceptual framework, but it also frames the literary selection at issue. Bradbury's text is one of the few US dystopic novels to envision a dictatorial regime whose propaganda includes, though sporadically, symbols inspired by the American Revolution; other significant occurrences are Nathanael West's *A Cool Million: The Dismantling of Lemuel Pitkin* (1934) and Sinclair Lewis's *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), on which the present essay will focus. Albeit it belongs to a similar literary genre, *Fahrenheit 451* will not be scrutinized as it does not share three relevant elements that West's and Lewis' novels have in common. First, both were published during the rise of fascism in Europe. Second, both imagine the rise of a fascist regime in the US, a crucial aspect typical of the literary genre: as a speculative representation, dystopia provides the subject matter necessary to approach the institutionalization of fascism in the US culture, a dimension otherwise impossible to investigate as fascism did not raise to power in the US. Methodologically speaking, science fiction will only perform this function within the hereby presented framework, avoiding a broader examination of its relationship with fascism (see Santesso). Third, in both novels, the advent of fascism in the US follows the attainment of a wide consensus achieved by two akin populist movements which rise and strengthen in the US in the face of critical socio-economic conditions.

The rhetorical and ideological importance of the national past transpires in Bradbury's words, particularly in the locution "long ago", through which Clarissa advocates the importance of the past while interpreting present ideological rationales. Emanuel Lévinas identified the invocation of a national cultural tradition in Hitlerism:

> The philosophy of Hitler is simplistic [primaire]. But the primitive powers that burn within it burst open its wretched phraseology under the pressure of an elementary force. They awaken the secret nostalgia within the German soul. Hitlerism is more than a contagion or a madness; it is an awakening of elementary feelings (64).

Lévinas underlines two aspects that are typical of populist modes of communication, here intended as a rhetorical stimulation of popular emotionality, and a nostalgic, multidirectional, mythologized construction of the past.

The notion of myth theorized by Roland Barthes resonates with populism, specifically in the way the functioning of myth intersects Laclau's reflection on form, activated through rhetoric: «far from being a parasite of ideology, rhetoric would actually be the anatomy of the ideological world» (13). According to Laclau «[n]o conceptual structure finds its internal cohesion without appealing to rhetorical devices» (67); Barthes argues that a conceptual structure «is not

at all an abstract, purified essence; it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function» (118), as a myth «is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, there are no 'substantial' ones» (107). Within this perspective, the American Revolution loses the coherence of its signified originality to foster its functional, rhetorical adaptability.

Fascism and the Myth of the Past

Whereas scholars have discussed the ontological relationship between fascism and a nation's past (Visse, Falasca Zamponi, Clark), there has been little use of the myth of the origins as a way of legitimizing fascism in the US – at least until very recently. References to this myth do however emerge in West's and Lewis's novels, precisely in the persuasive strategies employed by the populist leaders they portray: in *A Cool Million*, Nathan "Shagpoke" Whipple, former president of the United States and self-elected leader of the "National Revolutionary Party"; in *It Can't Happen Here*, fascist presidential candidate, eventually elected, Berzelius Windrip.

A Cool Million encompasses elements inspired by the mythologized US revolutionary past and suggests an adaptation of those tropes to the social, economic, and political conditions of the 1930s, thus making the American revolutionary rhetoric functional to the anti-establishment spirit of the «National Revolutionary Army». In his first long public speech, "Shagpoke" Whipple claims: «How could I, Shagpoke Whipple, ever bring myself to accept a program which promised to take from American citizens their inalienable birthright; [...] The time for a new party with the old American principles was, I realized, overripe» (West 110). The invocation of the US glorious past is clearly alluded by citing the *Declaration of Independence*, as he refers to his citizens' «inalienable birthright;» yet, Whipple re-actualizes the revolutionary struggle to his time by asking

> What is the role of the labor union today? It is a privileged club which controls all the best jobs for its members. When one of you applies for a job, even if the man who owns the plant wants to hire you, do you get it? Not if you haven't a union card. Can any tyranny be greater? Has liberty ever been more brazenly despised? (112).

The term "tyranny" and the rhetorical question concerning liberty clearly hint at the Revolution as a traditionally significant comparison that highlights an unspoken but evident implication: as the Americans had fought to re-establish their freedom during the Revolution, they should react accordingly in their

contemporary epoch. The elastic adaptation of the trope of the Revolutionary struggle becomes explicit as Whipple affirms:

> Who but the middle class left aristocratic Europe to settle on these shores? Who but the middle class, the small farmers and storekeepers, the clerks and petty officials, fought for freedom and died that America might escape from British tyranny? This is our country and we must fight to keep it so. If America is ever again to be great, it can only be through the triumph of the revolutionary middle class (1934: 112).

Whipple re-adapts the dichotomy between the good/freedom and the evil/tyranny from the revolutionary palimpsest and combines it with a new context to connote the unions as an oppressor and the workers as the victims of a tyranny. Moreover, by praising the role of a vexed middle class, he draws a historical parallel in which he encourages this social group to re-incarnate the same drive and the same leading function in overturning the US societal order, as those shown in the Revolution, thus using their historical role to legitimize them. The glorious revolutionary past that defined the United States is evoked in the sentence "if America is ever again to be great", where the adverb "again" alludes to a mythologized past model and encourages the adaptation of the same myth of greatness to a different epoch.

Similarly, in Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, the figure of populist-fascist leader Berzelius Windrip is represented as the main voice that spreads a fascist doctrine in the United States. In his rhetoric as well as in his followers' arguments, the idea of national greatness is evoked from a past model and invoked as an objective for the future of the US amidst a socio-economic crisis. In the beginning of the novel, during one of the several political debates on Berzelius Windrip, Francis Tasbrough – one of Windrip's supporters – asks protagonist Doremus Jessup: «Why are you so afraid of the word 'fascism,' Doremus? Just a word – just a word! And might not be so bad, [...] not so worse to have a real Strong Man, like Hitler or Mussolini – like Napoleon or Bismark in the good old days – and have 'em really run the country and make it efficient and prosperous again» (23). The use of the term "again", as unsettling as it may sound to the contemporary reader, performs the task mentioned above, i.e., evoking the greatness of a past dimension – an element which has powerfully re-emerged in contemporary US populist rhetoric. The adverb does not refer to any specific episode in the national past; however, in *It can't Happen Here*, the American Revolution constitutes an ideological subtext that complements the rhetorical apparatus of Windrip's party, particularly, in the party's corporative declensions. Another staunch debater is Adelaide Tarr Gimmitch, a «raging member of the Daughters of the American Revolution [DAR]» (5); the «Daughters»

allude to the original movement founded on October 11, 1890, and the narrator describes them as a group «composed of females who spend one half of their waking hours boasting of being descended from the seditious American colonists of 1776, and the other and more ardent half attacking all contemporaries who believe in precisely the principles for which those ancestors struggled» (5). Although the DAR are generally favorable to Windrip, their inherent inconsistency unveils an intrinsic incongruity that questions the ideological uniformity traditionally applied to the Revolution and reminds of the overturning of the function of fire in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*.

A similar dynamic emerges in another crucial organization represented in *It Can't Happen here*, the "Minute Men". Similarly, the reference to the historical imagery of the Revolution is overt, and the depiction of a paramilitary corps championing Windrip's ideology objectifies its «contagion» (6), as Gustave LeBon would say. During his inaugural speech, Windrip incites the Minute Men by saying, «I am addressing my own boys, the Minute Men, everywhere in America! To you and you only I look for help to make America a proud, rich land again» (1935: 164). The recurrence of the term "again" incapsulates an invocation to a glorious past and its readaptation to the contemporary age, suggesting implications that resemble those emerging in *A Cool Million*, as well as some disturbingly self-evident contemporary manifestations.

As in the case of the DAR, the Minute Men incorporate an intrinsic historical inconsistency, although its symptoms are not equally evident. Undoubtedly, Windrip's paramilitary force effectively embodies its leader's ideas, but the narrator underlines the Minute Men's constitutive symbolism in a way that suggests the fictionality of such uniformity. The narrator describes the Minute Men as

> a number of stray imitation soldiers, without side-arms or rifles, but in a uniform like that of an American cavalryman in 1870: slant-topped blue forage caps, dark blue tunics light blue trousers, with yellow stripes, tucked into leggings of black rubberoid for what appeared to be the privates, and boots of sleek black leather for officers. Each of them had on the right side of his collar the letters 'M.M.' and on the left, a five-pointed star (111).

The composite and multi-layered symbolism of their uniform includes disparate elements that belong to the US historical tradition, including the Unionist uniform which implies a resonant cultural background of division (or, rather, secession), and a five-pointed star on the left arm. Although the narrator provides a series of explanations about the star, the symbol alludes to the 1935 American flag, but certainly also to the original thirteen-star flag, namely the first symbol in which each star represented a single colony. The collision be-

tween the cultural imageries of the Civil War and the American Revolution, and the condensation of all the stars into one are rhetorical techniques that aimed at encompassing as many identitarian differences as possible in the same ideological totality.

In *The Populist Reason*, Laclau labels this tension as «equivalential articulation of demands» (74), where equivalence could be exemplified through the condensation of the stars in the flag, which blurs the urgence of each specificity and equalizes them all under one flexible common denominator. This principle suggests a commonality in the constitution of the corporative movements portrayed in *It Can't Happen Here* – the Daughters of the American Revolution and the Minute Men – whose symbolism is based on the confluence of different tropes, belonging to different backgrounds. Yet, a similar condensation, or rather, a resonant equivalential articulation, transpires *in nuce* also in *A Cool Million*, when Whipple discusses the "demands" of his followers in a passage worth repeating «Who but the middle class, the small farmers and storekeepers, the clerks and petty officials, fought for freedom and died that America might escape from British tyranny?» (West 112). The principle of convergence that unified different representatives of the colonial society in the common fight against the British Crown is what Whipple advocates for his fellow-citizens despite their differences; as Laclau argues, «There is the possibility that one difference, without ceasing to be a particular difference, assumes the representation of an incommensurable totality. In that way, its body is split between the particularity it still is and the more universal signification of which it is the bearer» (70).

Conclusion

It is evident that the movements portrayed in these novels are inherently incoherent because of the inevitable social differences that compose society, but the three of them condense their divisions to follow one leader, by adopting a common denominator out of the mythologized past of the nation: the American Revolution. The event is alluded explicitly in the "National Revolutionary Party", the "Daughters of the American Revolution", and the "Minute Men"; yet, ironically, a Founding Father emerges in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, as Montag is told that the foundation of the firemen is attributed to Benjamin Franklin. The novels here examined, including *Fahrenheit 451*, deploy a representation of the Revolution as a myth of the origins that is functional to the populist leaders involved, and never entirely faithful to their original referent; following an equivalential tension, its depiction shows the result of a condensing transforma-

tion, in other terms, «a relation of deformation», «which unites the concept of the myth to its meaning» (Barthes 121).

Deformation seems the notion capable of intertwining two apparently distant phenomena as the American Revolution and fascism. The connection that emerges from US dystopic fiction ultimately questions Shils' take on tradition. West's and Lewis' novels not only envision the eventuality of a fascist regime rising to power in the United States, but they also speculate on the irreversibility that can affect symbols of the national ideology when adapted to new contexts – that is to say, moving back to Bradbury, on the shift that transforms fire from danger to instrument of social control. Barthes and Laclau delineate the transition of a myth – or a conceptual structure – from the narrative dimension to the rhetorical one. The American Revolution can be interpreted as a discourse rather than a narrative, thus reacting in a more flexible way to the contingencies it is exposed to. Its speculative relation to fascism in dystopias might then surprise, but it can also partially help framing events such as the storming of the United States Capital.

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MAPPING LUDOTOPIAS IN ITALIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

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The Great Refusal takes a variety of forms.
(Marcuse 2007: VI)

This article explores play as a potential site of articulation of utopia for third-generation Italian American women writers: I define such metaphorical space as a "ludotopia", and I seek to establish whether it can be conceived as a pathway towards self-assertion.

Keywords: Ludotopia, Play, Italian American, Marcuse

Tra gioco e utopia: in cerca di ludotopie nella scrittura di autrici italoamericane
Questo articolo esplora il ludico come potenziale luogo di articolazione dell'utopia nella scrittura di autrici italoamericane di terza generazione: tale spazio metaforico, definito come "ludotopia", viene indagato nella sua potenziale funzione di strumento d'autoaffermazione.

Parole chiave: ludotopia, gioco, autrici italoamericane, Marcuse

Introduction

Utopia and play are generally understood as two irreconcilable concepts, as remarked by Olivia Burgess (131): while the first aims at social and political transformation with a single-mindedness that leaves no room for enjoyment, the latter lacks extrinsic goals and is rather focused on its own in-progress pleasurability (Abbott 44). However, in his seminal *Eros and Civilization* (1955), Herbert Marcuse identified an area of utopian investment in the aesthetic connotations of play, as an activity which had not yet been absorbed by advanced capitalism and therefore still possessed a potentially liberating quality. In the wake of Marcusean

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thought, among others, the concept of play as a symbolic arena of transcendence from a capitalistic and conformist society finds its artistic expression in the literary and cultural production of the 1960s and 1970s, while gradually losing its strength in the subsequent decades. In this scenario, migration is yet another term which can be put into play. In fact, it includes a utopian perspective of existential improvement and harmonious coexistence through the relocation in a wealthier, more welcoming nation; nonetheless, migrating also implies a painful uprooting and the complex challenge of assimilation.

In this article, play is explored as a potential site of articulation of utopia for third-generation Italian American women writers: I refer to this metaphorical space as "ludotopia"[1], namely the ideal dimension that ludic activities strive to reach, in which writers such as Diane di Prima, Annie Rachele Lanzillotto, Kym Ragusa and Rita Ciresi find their self-assertion as artists with an ethnic background. Play (in particular, music and poetry) is analyzed as a thematic element in these authors' work, but also as a utopian drive operating within and without the literary text, and conveying sociopolitical issues in their poetics. In this perspective, I seek to establish whether ludotopias can be conceived as an ideal pathway towards self-determination, focusing on examples of Italian American women's identity and artistic subjectivity from the 1960s onward.

Mapping Ludotopias…

The convergence between utopia and play has been studied by several scholars (Holquist; Suits; Abbott; Burgess) on the basis of the similarities the two notions bear. The most prominent aspects shared by utopia and play can be identified in their mutual direction toward futurity and happiness and their tendency to blur the boundaries between real and unreal. A further point of contact between utopia and play lies in the idea, expressed by Abbott in relation to utopia, of «the radical expansion of desire and imagination» (51): in this sense, both utopias and play reveal the urge to create a better world and indicate faith in the transformative power of transcendence, echoing Ernst Bloch's conceptualization in his magnum opus *The Principle of Hope*. In his own meditations on utopia, which develop and are treated in several books, Marcuse does not directly reference Bloch, but works in the same theoretical horizon, connecting

1 The term "ludotopia" was coined by Espen Aarseth and Stephan Günzel in 2019, in their edited volume *Ludotopia: Spaces, Places, and Territories in Computer Games*. The collection applies philosophical theories of space to the study of digital games; my use of the term refers instead to play as a utopian dimension.

Bloch's utopian perspective on desire and imagination to a Marxist political project. In Marcuse's view, the liberation of personal time from work alienation in the wake of technological advancement – conventionally considered as a utopian goal – «is the most concrete of all historical possibilities and at the same time the most rationally and effectively repressed» (1974: XV). For Marcuse, the engine of such repression is the internalized pressure to contain one's proclivity to achieve pleasure unregimented in the capitalist logic of production: this introjection is a typical feature of the technologically advanced, repressive civilization of the 1950s America in which Marcuse was writing. This "surplus repression", namely the unnecessary controls exerted by specific institutions of domination, affects also the aesthetic sphere: the latter is in fact colonized by a conformist, tranquillizing mass culture designed to promote consumption and deflate any potential for criticism or insurrection.

However, in Marcuse's view there is a way out of this deadlock, which is activated through a liberating and utopian resource: the play drive. In fact, if society succeeded in releasing itself from surplus repression, a redistribution of goods and liberated time would ensue, creating the conditions for a societal redefinition according to aesthetic principles. The aesthetic dimension, explicitly connected by Marcuse to Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller's theories, is proposed as the ideal site of social liberation, in which alienated labor would be substituted by the «the free play of human faculties» (1974: 215-216): Marcuse sees the unproductivity of play as the trait which can positively contaminate work, transforming it into an activity truly aesthetic in nature. Marcuse identifies the access to this ludotopic, transformative dimension as a consequence brought about by "negative thinking", that is a critical stance having «speculative and utopian character» (2007a: 171), «a political nature and exists in open contrast with the positive, conformist mode of the "established society"» (2007a: 227).

Adopting a Marcusean perspective, I identify ludotopias precisely in the tension between this negative standpoint on established versions of society and an aesthetic sphere which, by facilitating the transcendence from a repressive/underprivileged dimension, may foster original attempts at imagining alternative possibilities at once playful and political. The aesthetic forms I focus on in the context of the present article are music[2] and poetry: both activities can in fact be termed as "ludic", in that they can be immersive experiences, they are autotelic, they have a ritual character and / or are repetitive; moreover, they are pleasurable both for the players and their audience, the latter acting as a player in itself.

2 On the playful character of music, see Gabor Csepregi.

…In Italian American Women's Writing

The investigation of play is not completely absent from literary criticism; nonetheless, its analysis has mostly been limited to the linguistic experimentation and stylistic aspects of postmodernist texts written by male authors. In fact, playing is frequently represented in literature and in culture at large as a prerogative of the male members of society, in part because of the competitive quality of the games (Messenger 1981, 1990); however, I contend that considering this underexplored thematic element in a different corpus can illuminate in unprecedented ways aspects of gender, race, and class which are crucial to the narrative. This becomes all the more evident when critical attention is devoted to play rather than games: while the latter is strictly dependent on compliance to a set of rules, the first refers rather to a playful and pleasurable performance, and tends to question its own normative framework. On such premises, I set out to map ludotopic iterations of music and poetry in the works of third-generation Italian American women writers. In fact, in my view the latters' works encapsulate a privileged site of articulation for ludotopias in light of the authors' specific positionality, as daughter of immigrants who become artistically active from the 1950s onward.

In essence, the experience of migration entails the election of a site in which the migrant is willing to actualize his/her utopian perspectives; this is all the more true for migrants relocating in the United States, in which «there has always been at work a process of selection and exclusion of who might be admitted to the new experiment in democracy, veined as it was with utopian tendencies and biblical mirages» (Carravetta 120). While migrating to America in unprecedented numbers between 1890 and 1930, Italians were carrying with them an important baggage of political utopias and ideals, as the stories of the anarchist Carlo Tresca and the socialist poet Arturo Giovannitti testify. This tension towards self-realization as both a personal and a collective project is experienced and represented in literary terms by first-generation immigrants with the intensity of their first-hand experience, but it resurfaces in renewed forms in second- and third-generation authors. The latter, specifically, often inherit an intricate legacy of aspirations toward assimilation and social climbing, complicated by guilt over the loss and/or betrayal of their ethnic identity – in an increasingly globalized American scenario. Therefore, investigating the literary re-actualization of such tension is particularly worthwhile in authors who enter this multifaceted process during (in the case of the late Diane di Prima), or following the explosion of the (largely Marcusean) utopian impulse on the U.S. cultural and political scene of the 1960s.

The role of play becomes increasingly charged in symbolic terms in the

literary output of American women of Italian descent. In such works, play is a dimension which is at once often denied (in light of its general connotation as an ancillary and unproductive activity), but sought after, in view of its liberating potential. It functions as a space of negotiation between ethnicity, (artistic) identity and society: a threshold where gender dynamics, family ties and traditions, inherited behavioral models, and a heavy Catholic heritage are questioned and reconceptualized. Ludotopias such as music and poetry thus stand as a horizon inspiring to challenge preordained notions of women's role in society, conveying a utopian drive in forms that exceed the limits imposed by both patriarchal family mores and the constricting work ethic of American society. In particular, music acts in Rita Ciresi's short story collection *Sometimes I Dream in Italian* (2000) and in Kym Ragusa's memoir *The Skin Between Us* (2006) as a ludotopia in which the protagonist tries to find her self-assertion and a less painful sense of belonging. Diane di Prima's and Annie Rachele Lanzillotto's poetic experimentations, instead, metatextually actualize poetry as a site in which political credos and demands merge with a reclaiming of the poet's ethnic identity.

Music as a Ludotopia

In his influential 2005 book *Audiotopia: Music, Race, and America*, Josh Kun argues that for American artists music serves as a utopian space in which their racial/ethnic and their artistic identities can potentially intersect in culturally heterogeneous, liberating ways. I aim to tap into Kun's thesis, adding that listening to / performing music also implies the inclusion of the player in an arena of redefinition of her[3] creative self. Far from downplaying the artist's positionality and its ramifications, music becomes a space in which she performs not only the musical piece, but also herself in ways that reshape her own self-perception as a woman and an artist of ethnic descent. In a Marcusean perspective, this is due to the fact that music is one of the activities that can lead to "artistic alienation", namely an estrangement from the repressive society into a dimension from which a renewal of the social order can be reframed and proposed (1972: 97-98). This representation of music as a potentially ludotopic space fostering personal and societal change is foregrounded in Ciresi's short story collection and in Ragusa's memoir with fluctuating results.

3 For the sake of my argument, in this article I am going to use only female pronouns, since both the authors I focus on and the protagonists/narrators in their works identify as women.

In *Sometimes I Dream in Italian*, the recurrent character of Lina, a second-generation Italian American teenager, struggles to negotiate her ambitions as a singer with the codifications imposed on her by her traditional ethnic background. Her intense relationship with music features most prominently in "La Stella d'Oro": this story chronicles a crucial moment in Lina's adolescence, in which her beloved "Nonna" dies and she has her first menstruation. "Nonna" is Lina's initiator to music: when visiting her grandmother, the young girl learns to play the piano, listens to records with her and develops the aspiration to become an opera singer. Nonetheless, her mother Filomena disagrees with her agenda: despite acknowledging Lina's talent, she warns her: «"don't be getting too many ideas about where you're going"» (70). Her injunction is partially due to a concern with the social stigma attached to women artists in the conservative Italian American community of New Haven, but Filomena seemingly aims to contain Lina's aspiration in a more class-conscious framework. Within the latter, Lina will probably not derive artistic fulfilment, but she will be more likely to earn a stable income or marry a man who provides for her. Lina tries to reject her mother's repressive order, both in "La Stella d'Oro" and in other stories: first by remodulating her plan of becoming an opera singer into a less prestigious and less challenging career as a showgirl, then by winning a scholarship for a School of Music – but the pressure to conform she has introjected finally overwhelms her: she gets pregnant while she is still in Music School, drops out and renounces all aspirations to her career, becoming a suburban homemaker. This capitulation to a more traditional gender role can be interpreted, in Marcusean terms, as an instance of "repressive desublimation": the conciliation of erotic[4] impulses into ostensibly transgressive forms, which eventually confirm the conventions of the repressive social reality originating them (2007: 59-86). The utopian drive is thus neutralized; the realization of Lina's (and Ciresi's) ludotopic project through music remains unattained.

Conversely, Kym Ragusa's memoir seems to offer a more hopeful approach to the idea of the protagonist's (and author's persona's) racial/ethnic self-identification through music. Ragusa belongs to two cultural traditions, African American (on her mother's part) and Italian American, and, as sound scholar John Gennari highlights (227-233), music plays a crucial role in her upbringing and self-determination. Not only is it the element facilitating her bonding with her Italian American family (her cousin Marie and her father, with whom she

4 Marcuse uses the terms "Eros" and "erotic" not only in a sexual, but also in a Freudian sense, referring to a life-affirming drive sublimated in domains such as art, religion, and familial love.

has a troubled relationship), but it creates a space for a utopian multiracial harmony in a pivotal scene in the narrative. At the feast of the Madonna of Mount Carmel, in East Harlem, Ragusa joins in the crowd of Italian Americans, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Haitians who are singing in the religious parade: she experiences a sense of kinship especially with the women singing, relieving her of a lifetime of feeling out of place in both her African American and her Italian American neighborhoods. Yet, as Gennari points out, her solace is temporary and she does not know the words of the songs she hears (233), thus highlighting the impossibility of a final recognition and an actual reconciliation with her biracial ethnic background. In fact, I contend that the most significant ludotopia in *The Skin Between Us* is represented instead by the passion Ragusa develops, as a young girl, for punk rock music: she starts playing the drums and discovers the British band X-Ray Spex, whose lead singer Poly Styrene is a biracial woman with «the same springy corkscrew hair and the same in-between skin» as hers (221). Ragusa declares to have «found a new tribe» (221) thanks to her identification with Styrene, and her hope in this ludotopia resonates in her preface to *Olive Grrrls*, an anthology of feminist writing by Italian American women, in which she takes a defined position regarding music's transformative potential, by writing: «we're louder and stronger when we sing together» ("Foreword": w. p.).

Poetry as a Ludotopia

An unprofitable and ritual expression of creativity, aesthetic play is seen by Marcuse as a revitalizing force acting against societal repression: thus, poetry, as an intrinsically critical dimension, also incorporates political claims to the liberation of the self. Poetry is configured as a quintessentially political ludotopia in Annie Rachele Lanzillotto's and Diane di Prima's conception: an indispensable activity in which the composite identity of both artists is recreated in a form that is at once individual and collective.

Echoing Ragusa, the connection with music is one of the key aspects in Lanzillotto's multi-disciplinary performance poetry: much of it is in fact sung out loud and happens in theaters or in the streets, before an audience. Her poetry is a performance of, and a call to, resistance and bravery: Lanzillotto is a survivor who has been struggling with recurring tumors since her college years, in addition to dealing with her father's abusive behavior and a dismal financial situation. Despite the trying circumstances looming over her very existence, she uses her artistic persona to call attention on societal inequalities, in a Marcusean "negative thinking" mode; and she does so adopting a playful tone and

style which desecrates even her gloomiest poems. Lanzillotto's art has a clear political content: the poems collected in *Schistsong* (2013), *Hard Candy* and *Pitch Roll Yaw* (2018 a and b) aim to raise awareness, if not agitate, the listener on extremely concrete issues such as access to health care, housing, and LGBT rights.

In Lanzillotto's poetry, oppression is often of an economic nature. In the somber poem "Spirit Track", and in *Schistsong* in general, she laments the disappearance of iconic meeting places for the queer community and the eviction of the original Italian and ethnic New Yorkers, pushed out by a rampant gentrification: in her theatrical performance *The Flat Earth*, she roars: «New York City is my lover. My lover kicked me out for a rich girl» (w.p.). And yet, poetry is configured for Lanzillotto as the utopian space in which her social criticism, her Italian heritage, her illness and her queerness loudly coexist, mobilizing the audience and eliciting its outraged identification with her.

Audience recruitment is also one of the objectives of Diane di Prima's poetry: as David Stephen Calonne illustrates in his recent monograph on di Prima, after relocating in San Francisco from the East Coast, she would distribute her poems free of charge, and read them on the steps of City Hall, in order to persuade ordinary white collars to join the revolution (119). As it is evident from the title of such poems – *Revolutionary Letters*, which were published in five editions –, di Prima's intent was to use poetry as a bridge between her artistic and intellectual activity, the social causes she championed (most notably the antiwar movement, women's rights, and the environmental cause), and the community she belonged to. The utopian drive inspiring her endeavor has a clear radical matrix: the *Revolutionary Letters* are in fact dedicated to Bob Dylan and her grandfather Domenico, with whom she had a strong bond and who was active in Carlo Tresca's Italian American anarchist movement. In this perspective, Calonne remarks how «to continue the anarchist imperatives of her grandfather Domenico, di Prima ultimately had to literally take to the streets» (119).

Di Prima's grandfather Domenico's legacy of radicalism is matched by another utopian trait in her poetic output, which is the open-endedness of her work: in addition to the constant expansion of her *Revolutionary Letters*, di Prima's epic poem *Loba* is a decades-long work. This procedural growth also has a unique ludic quality, in that play entails a certain level of spontaneity, unpredictability, and the irreducibility to a complete formal control. This stylistic freedom is a feature in her poetics dating back to her association to the Beat Movement, which exceeds the literary fortunes of the movement itself and furthers the legacy of its utopian aspects to the 21st century. In "Keep the Beat," one of the poems collected in her 2014 *The Poetry Deal*, di Prima writes that the Beat is actually not just a generation: «not once / **one** time / **one** country [...]

& it plays the edge» (82, in bold in the text). This poem was first read on May Day 2010 at City Lights Bookstore, a ludotopic space in itself and the Beats' Mecca, founded in 1953 by another Italian American poet, the late Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Playing on the edge of art and politics is the 'deal' of di Prima's poetry, unfolding in a ludotopic space in which her ethnic and gender identity fluidly merge with her religious syncretism and artistic polymorphism.

Future Perspectives on Ludotopias

In this brief analysis, I tried to chart a map of ludotopic occurrences in the works of four well-known women writers in Italian Americana, active from the 1960s onward. My attempt is still in an embryonic stage, and therefore it is not exhaustive: much remains to be investigated, with respect to ludotopias in Italian American women's writing. For instance, music and poetry are only two of the possible expressions of play to be explored; moreover, expanding the corpus of my analysis would be worthwhile. Focusing critical attention on a broader corpus would in fact be instrumental to assess the centrality of the ludotopic dimension to Italian American women's literature, and to establish the extent to which the various authors are aware of the transformative potential embedded in the ludotopias they portray in their works. In fact, in the four authors I have hitherto taken into consideration, ludotopias seem to be deliberately mobilized as a poetic and political stance fostering aesthetic and social change, also due to the heightened sensibility towards play and utopias brought about by the 1960s counterculture (and its current implications); nonetheless, a more thorough examination of ludotopias in texts pertaining to other historical periods may yield different results.

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