

# 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”<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup> 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 latter's 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<sup>3</sup> 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<sup>4</sup> 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 Lanzillo'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 Lanzillo'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: Lanzillo 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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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