

*DI TERRA E DI MISTERO* BY TUTI: PLACE AND IDENTITY IN TIMES OF COVID

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### Introduction

Never before in history has a pandemic been experienced in such a social manner; through social media in fact, community-centered approaches have been at the core of coping mechanisms adopted by a modern society that has had to face its limits and fears yet again. Italy, as Europe's first epicenter of the viral epidemic in 2020, struggled to not collapse under the weight of pandemic-related gruesome consequences. Quarantines, restrictions, and forced confinements – anachronistic concepts, which were known of before only from books, documentaries, or dystopic novels – left individuals dumbfounded and have deeply altered the fabric of society. Space has shrunk, while time has dilated.

Because they were particularly isolated due to social distancing, artists from all fields took advantage of communication technologies to reach their audiences. As did 26 national and international writers who united under the Garzanti Publishing House to share their personal interpretations of this delicate and poignant, yet frightful, point in time: after all, a book is a “time capsule that will allow humanity to preserve a record of this moment for a hundred years to come” (Mauri 2020: 7)<sup>1</sup>. The title of the choral volume, dedicated to Luis Sepúlveda (1949-2020), *ANDRÀ tutto BENE. Gli scrittori al tempo della quarantena* (2020)<sup>2</sup>, echoes the message of hope that Italians sung and shouted from their balconies, thus spreading it in social networks worldwide and emphasizing their *italianità* (Italianness). Indeed, the motto became a collective ritual that linked private and public identities and was reinforced through social media since “via messaging applications, microblogs, personal profiles, walls, and newsfeeds, a constructed identity is being created, monitored, curated,

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<sup>1</sup> Where not otherwise specified, translations are by the author of the paper.

<sup>2</sup> First published as an e-book (available since April 9<sup>th</sup> 2020) – a format that “allowed these stories to travel immediately and all over the world” (Mauri 2020: 6) – the volume is a charity project. All profits from authors, the publisher, distributors, and online stores are donated to the “Papa Giovanni XXIII” Hospital in Bergamo (Book trailer at: <https://www.garzanti.it/libri/ritanna-armeni-andra-tutto-bene-9788811816423/>). This is not the only choral project of this period; see, for instance, PERMUNIAN, Francesco (ed.) (2020). *Piccola antologia della peste*, Vicenza, Ronzani Editore; VENTURELLI, Claudio, GORI Manuela (eds.) (2020), *Momenti sospesi. Raccolta di Poesie e Racconti ai Tempi dei Covid-19*, in edit.

shifted, and shared by the more than 2 billion identified active social media users” (Mashall 2020: 96).

Drawing upon theories of place-identity and place attachment, the present paper aims at investigating the relationship between place and identity in times of Covid-19 in one of the short stories of the volume, “Di Terra e di Mistero” (Of Earth and of Mystery), by Ilaria Tuti (1976-)<sup>3</sup>, an emerging writer of Friulian origins. This individual experience and interpretation of reality is transformed into a collective stance that depicts a twofold re-discovery: that of the Self and of a social identity.

### **1. Exploring space: The making of a place**

In “Di Terra e di Mistero”, an autobiographical account of a day spent in confinement during the Covid 19 pandemic, the autodiegetic narrator offers readers wide-ranging reflections, which will be analyzed by dwelling on the multisensory nature of spatial exploration.

The writer’s journey takes place in the garden that epitomizes Tuti’s epistemic reading of this historical junction: as an open-air area near a house, albeit limiting since it is a physically circumscribed space, the garden becomes a portal through which the mind escapes from reality<sup>4</sup>. In this liminal dimension, where ‘emotions recollected in tranquility’ open the gates of memory, present and past, as well as familiar and foreign spheres, individual and collective identities, stances of deprivation and donation seem to merge. While the abstract concept of space, detached from cultural interpretations, may be void of meaning, a place acquires as many meanings as people associate to it because, in the making of places, individuals attach qualities to the constituent elements of a place. In line with the transactional view of settings then, place could be considered a meaningful product of the interaction of a person with space. As a result, it actually becomes an organizing principle of an individual’s past experiences and their subjective interpretations (Speller, Lyons, and Twigger-Ross 2002: 26).

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<sup>3</sup> Along with some short stories, which were published on magazines and in anthologies, Tuti debuted in 2018 when she introduced the character of Teresa Battaglia, a sixty-year old ill detective, into the center of three of her novels: *Fiori Sopra l’Inferno* (2018), *Ninfa dormiente* (2019), and *Luce nella notte* (January 2021). In 2020, she explored the stories of Carnic carriers during WWI in *Fiore di Roccia*.

<sup>4</sup> Some authors chose the home (Armenti, Bellomo, Biondillo, Buticchi, Dalton, Festa, Galiano, Gazzola, Gramellini, Sundas, Truzzi), garden (Caboni, Tuti), or other spaces, such as paintings (Tuzzi) or simply the outdoor area (Vitali) as settings; others chose the interplay between closed and open spaces (Auci, Basso, Bosco, Frontani, Gnone, Sánchez). Some writers preferred letters as form of communication – thus, merging various places: from Bovincini to Noiville, journalist of *Le Monde*, and Noiville’s reply to Bovincini and the Italians; from Carrisi to two children; from Lahiri to the Italians – or poetry (Vichi), but the majority opted for the short prose genre.

Therefore, the concept of place, that is space endowed with value (Tuan 1977: 6), is to be interpreted both physically and psychologically. In accordance with a sense of place – one of the three readings<sup>5</sup> of the making of places from a sociological point of view – a place “is remarkable, and what makes it so is an unwindable spiral of material form and interpretative understandings or experiences” (Gieryn 2000: 471).

Experiences and places are indeed closely intertwined (Tuan 1977; Bott, Cantrill and Myers 2003; Norsidah and Khalilah 2015); the senses through which human beings explore reality therefore play a pivotal role in the reading of places and imbue space with meaning.

### ***1.1 Smell and Touch***

The incipit of the short story focuses on an olfactory element – “Petricore. / Pietra e icore, il sangue minerale che la mitologia greca racconta scorrere nelle vene degli esseri immortali” (Tuti 2020: 295)<sup>6</sup>, i.e. petrichor, the peculiar smell of rainfall on dry soil – that ignites the mechanisms of memory through sensorial associations. In evoking remote times and atmospheres, the abstract smell seems to physically set its roots in the soil of the garden, which has now become a forest, as it was neglected due to the many daily commitments. Tuti returns to nature: the garden thus becomes a window on present reality and on her and the community’s past. On one hand, the scent of rain and soil allows the author to plunge into her childhood; on the other, the rediscovery of the garden entails deeper meanings and experiential references. If, in the ‘normal’ flow of time, nature could have been discarded (the garden remained uncultivated, as some sort of accessory element of everyday life, especially after her father’s passing), in the ‘abnormality’ of the pandemic, in which individuals find they have no apparent control over their lives, the writer feels the need to tame or reorganize nature. However, the nostalgic and somewhat comforting odor clashes with the lingering smell of her father, who used to take care of the garden. As noted, “odors lend character to objects and places, making them distinctive, easier to identify and remember” (Tuan 1977: 11). Hence, “c’è voluta una pandemia per farmi camminare di nuovo tra queste fronde, per riconsegnarmi il mio tempo” (295)<sup>7</sup>, and ultimately to take her back to her father’s realm.

The senses of rootedness, insideness (Relph 1976), and attachment (Knez 2005) emphasize the deep bond between people and space, leading scholars working in the fields of

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<sup>5</sup> Together with a sense of place, power behind places and place-professionals is to be found (Gieryn 2000: 468-471).

<sup>6</sup> Trad. “Stone and ichor, the mineral blood that, according to Greek mythology, flows in the veins of the immortal beings”.

<sup>7</sup> Trad. “It took a pandemic to make me walk among these branches again, to give me back my time”.

environmental psychology and social geography to develop the concept of place-identity. Following the first elaborations on this idea as initially proposed by Proshansky (1978), three different approaches of place emerge: place as self-extension, settlement-identity, whereby “place can be congruent with the values, attitudes and behavioural dispositions of the self”, and place-attachment that is the “affective bond that people can establish with some places” (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira 2012).

“So di fumo e di polvere, e dell’erba che mi tinge i palmi” (296)<sup>8</sup>, writes Tuti, after describing her attempts to clear the greenery. In the simplicity of the action, she concentrates on physical exertion, which is reminiscent of typical jobs of the agricultural community, and is surrounded by nature, thus almost becoming one of its components. The human being / nature parallelism becomes a trope in this short story: both entities are suffocating and need room to breath: “Forse sfronderemo le nostre esistenze, così come ora io sfrondo il verde perché respiri, affinché quanto di buono trovi spazio per svilupparsi grandiosamente” (Tuti 2021: 297)<sup>9</sup>. This work philosophy, where labor is one of the founding strategies for overcoming fears and worries, is culturally associated with the people of these territories and the “cult of ruined hands”: “La fatica non permette alla paura di farsi avanti, né accorda terreno ai turbamenti. Il lavoro manuale concede una tregua alla mente, dà spazio al corpo togliendolo ai pensieri ricorrenti” (Tuti 2020: 297)<sup>10</sup>.

## *1.2 Sight & Sound*

The primacy of sight over the other senses in space exploration is confirmed by long-lasting traditions of prose production and especially travel writing, which entrusts descriptions with countless narrative functions. Nevertheless, studies on soundscapes (Schafer 1994) have highlighted the importance and complementarity of sound analysis in the creation of place depiction, in that sound dramatizes spatial experience (Tuan 1977: 16). In Tuti’s short story, some clear dualisms emerge: the breathing – suffocating dichotomy that describes the individual-nature parallelism is mirrored in the voice – sound couple: “Questo è il momento del dolore e del lutto, del silenzio respiratore, ma verrà anche il tempo in cui la vita riprenderà a scorrere vivace e rumorosa nelle strade (Tuti 2020: 299)<sup>11</sup>. All sounds connected to daily

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<sup>8</sup> Trad. “I smell of smoke and dust, and of the grass that dyes my palms”.

<sup>9</sup> Trad. “Maybe we will prune our existences, just as I now prune the green to allow it to breathe, so that the good finds the space to develop grandly”.

<sup>10</sup> Trad. “Fatigue does not allow fear to come forward, nor does it grant ground to disturbances. Manual labor grants a respite to the mind, gives space to the body by detaching it from recurring thoughts”.

<sup>11</sup> Trad. “This is the time of pain and mourning, of breathing silence, but the time will also come when life will resume lively and noisy in the streets”.

activities are muted. Sounds, time, and lives seem to be frozen in their becoming, including factories, “un punto di riferimento dinamico e vitale per intere comunità ora è muto e immobile” (Tuti 2020: 300)<sup>12</sup>.

The Virus or the Pandemic – the *other*, the enemy – have a twofold function: a depriving one, by taking away the ability to breathe and “i riti consolatori della morte e della vita” (the consoling rites of death and life, Tuti 2020: 298); and a giving one, since they infuse ‘breath’ into time, that “dilata le giornate” (dilates the days, Tuti 2020: 296).

Tuti’s gaze scrutinizes nature while lingering on inanimate as well as animate objects; live creatures such as a robin, fish in the pond, or a butterfly. The latter becomes a pretext to mention the theory of convergent evolution, that sustains the inevitability of change without any waste, and to pose one of the two questions that are presented in this story to the fictional reader: “Anche noi terremo ciò che ci fa bene e ci libereremo del nocivo?” (Tuti 2020: 297)<sup>13</sup>. The author expresses her awareness of the crucial importance of this historical period and of the need to find a new paradigm for interpreting reality.

### **Place & Identity: Individuality to collectivity**

In all her works, Ilaria Tuti delves into place identity by presenting her knowledge, feelings and everyday experience in Friuli<sup>14</sup>, be it fictionalized or real, which denote her emotional and affective bond with the region. While ‘place’ is generally perceived as the conceptualization of space in terms of individual identity, place identity could also be considered “a substructure of the social identity of the self, consisting of aspects of self-concepts that are based on the idea of belonging to geographically defined groups” (Bernardo and Palma-Oliveira 2012: 37).

Within the aforementioned theoretical and narrative framework, the sense of belonging to Friuli, a region in the Northeast corner of the Italian peninsula, unfolds through elements of linguistic but also territorial, and, mostly, cultural commonalities. This multidimensional collective identity presents five typical traits that were described by ARLeF (Agenzie Regionâl pe Lenghe Furlane). The previously mentioned gardening recalls the first feature: Friulians are “a peasant people, therefore attached to the earth, close to nature; organized in solid family structures and small village communities; hardworking, but also gifted with

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<sup>12</sup> Trad. “A dynamic and vital point of reference for entire communities is now silent and motionless”.

<sup>13</sup> Trad. “Will we also keep what is good for us and get rid of the harmful?”.

<sup>14</sup> Several intellectuals wrote about or from the Friuli Venezia Giulia region; just to mention a few: Caterina Percoto (1812-1887), Ippolito Nievo (1831-1861), Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907), Umberto Saba (1833-1957), Italo Svevo (1861-1928), David Maria Turoldo (1916-1992), Novella Cantarutti (1920-2009), Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), Carlo Sgorlon (1930-2009), Amedeo Giacomini (1939-2006).

entrepreneurial skills; traditionalist and true to their word”. Industrial productivity, which is typical of the area where the writer lives, is another element of observation because “il contagio ha cambiato anche il panorama” (Tuti 2020: 300)<sup>15</sup>; the author therefore turns her gaze beyond the limits of the garden to find an unnatural stillness.

Secondly, Friulians are “a Christian people: therefore believers, inserted in the great Catholic tradition, endowed with the virtues of simplicity, humility, austerity, and the ability to endure the trials of life with patience and firmness”. Tuti’s reference to Pierluigi Cappello<sup>16</sup> is associated with this aspect – “Una cultura contadina e artigianale che sapeva sostenere con umiltà ma con occhi ben dritti e asciutti lo sguardo della vita e della morte” (Tuti 2020: 298)<sup>17</sup> – whereby the example of older generations now needs to be replicated by the young. As noted by Tuti, though, “[...] appartengo a una generazione non abituata a lottare in massa per la vita; la morte, fino a qualche settimana fa, era un dramma che si compiva nell’intimità della famiglia, mentre ora si è presa il palcoscenico di un’intera nazione, e si replica in altre” (Tuti 2020: 299)<sup>18</sup>. The private and public, as well as national and international, spheres thus lose their clear boundaries. Drawing on the semantic field of war, the writer takes up the feelings of captivity and battle that are so frequently associated with the coeval period.

Thirdly, Friulians are “a Nordic people: and therefore strong, serious, slow, taciturn, disciplined, with a sense of organization and collectivity, but with a background of existential sadness that finds comfort not only in industriousness, but also in wine, and expression in choral singing. Fourthly, a frontier people: placed in a position exposed to risks, tempered by a very long history of invasions, raiding and battles; but also with the possibility of opening up and relating positively with neighbors from other cultures, of mixing with them, of welcoming them and being welcomed by them”. Lastly, “a migrant people: the imbalance between population and resources has always forced a number of people to leave their homeland, to seek work and survival in other countries. In the pain of leaving, love is strengthened, and in the discomforts of distance, an idealized image of one’s country is consolidated. In the communities of arrival, the *fogolârs* are recreated and the language and traditions are maintained”. These last three aspects are summarized by the author’s attitude

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<sup>15</sup> Trad. “The contagion has also changed the landscape”.

<sup>16</sup> Cappello (1967-2017), Italian writer and poet who extensively portrayed this land. For more on the author see FABBRO, Franco, RIEM NATALE, Antonella, D’AGOSTINI, Marco (eds.) (2019), *Pierluigi Cappello. Un poeta sulla pista della luce*, Udine, Forum.

<sup>17</sup> Trad. “A peasant and artisan culture that knew how to sustain the gaze of life and death with humility but directly with dry eyes”.

<sup>18</sup> Trad. “I belong to a generation that is not used to fighting en masse for life; until a few weeks ago, death was a tragedy that took place within the intimacy of a family, while now it has taken the stage of an entire nation, and is repeated in others”.

towards others – intertextuality plays a fundamental role in strengthening invisible ties between spaces and times: the flood of 1998 is connected to the trucks that carried the coffins of the deceased from Bergamo to be cremated in Friuli; the 1976 earthquake, the *Orcolat*, that deeply affected Friuli and its people, is linked to the 2019 earthquake in Croatia, where the Italian region sent fifty Civil Protection volunteers. Overall, the writer rules: “Sopravvivere, a volte, è semplicemente stringere mani in una lunga catena” (Tuti 2020: 299)<sup>19</sup>. This sense of unity is resumed by exploiting intertextuality and taking up Aldo Moro’s words binding individuals to their present, with no way to escape, and giving them the courage to walk together.

Tuti’s account is evidence of how place attachment is established between individuals and their affective bond with several places: the garden, the neighborhood, the region, and the nation; an existential insideness (Relph 1976) that stems from immersion in a place that feels like home not just for an individual, but for an entire community. Moreover, by referring to a conversation with the writer Sarah Savioli, the function of culture and writers as tools capable of reviving society is emphasized.

### **Final remarks**

Tuti’s story is a journey in time and space, even if there is no physical movement outside the garden, where invisible threads are created between several dualistic aspects. This pandemic overturns the rites of life and death and simultaneously leads the female character, i.e. the author, into a process of self-discovery by emphasizing a twofold function of the pandemic: deprivation and giving. Tuti elaborates this movement among dichotomies – outer/inner, body/mind, voice/silence, breathing/suffocating, ordinary/extraordinary – with self-awareness and her peculiar ability to reflect on her homeland, Friuli, and her origins. The author’s perceptions and reading of the physical environment contribute to her process of identity formation and turns this period of crisis into an opportunity for self-reflection. While place is indeed a constituent of self-identity, this individual stance takes this concept further, as it explores the same beliefs of a collective identity. In doing so, Tuti’s autobiographical narration actually evokes themes and values with which the majority of Friulians identify themselves: hard work, sacrifice and strength and, last but not least, their deep bond with their land. The protagonist / author, who feels like a prisoner in space and time, focuses on macro- and micro-events of local history, thus finding her personal solution to the present situation by

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<sup>19</sup> Trad. “Sometimes, surviving simply meaning joining hands in a long chain”.

fleeing into nature. The alteration of both enclosed and outer spaces – factories and plants – is just a mirror of her process of identity adjustment.

Tuti's deterministic thinking, which reinforces the bond between human beings and nature, is embedded in the final lines of the story:

“L'icore scorre anche dentro di noi, dopotutto. Apparteniamo alla terra e al mistero.

È un pensiero confortante.

Un respiro profondo. Andiamo avanti” (Tuti 2020:302)<sup>20</sup>.

Nonetheless, the author's second question remains unanswered, as the potential answer is entrusted to time: “Mi chiedo se d'ora in avanti le distanze tra essere umani saranno colmate dalla paura e dal sospetto, o se saremo capaci di gettare tra noi le radici di nuove connessioni emozionali” (Tuti 2020: 297)<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Trad. “The ichore also flows within us, after all. We belong to the earth and to mystery. / It is a reassuring thought. / A deep breath. Let's go on.”

<sup>21</sup> Trad. “I wonder if from here on the distances between human beings will be filled with fear and suspicion, or if we will be able to lay the roots of new emotional connections between us”.



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