

Resisting Monologue: Alba de Céspedes' *Nessuno torna indietro* and the Subversion of Paternal Authority

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In her seminal text on women under the fascist regime, Victoria de Grazia refers to Alba de Céspedes' *Nessuno torna indietro* as encapsulating the types of restraint women were subject to during the interwar period. For de Grazia, the central space of the novel, the Grimaldi boarding house in Rome where the protagonists reside, is symbolic of women's social condition during the fascist period.¹ The novel's firm grounding in its historical moment is a point generally agreed upon in criticism on the work, most especially in relation to the figure of the *sposa e madre esemplare*, the predominant model for women lauded and promoted by fascist discourse, despite the often very different aspirations of many Italian women and girls.² *Nessuno torna indietro* confronts this model in the figures of the novel's eight protagonists. Valerio Ferme even sees the novel as "situat[ing] itself subversively" in specific relation to the tenets of the fascist demographic campaign.³ In contesting the *sposa e madre* model through the figures of its diverse characters, *Nessuno torna indietro* also reimagines the necessary counterpart to that model, namely, the *marito e padre*. As Sandra Carletti explains, "*Nessuno torna indietro* exudes examples of non-normative femininity, potentially disruptive to the regime's social engineering. In their diversity, de Céspedes' young women share the same need for identity and self-assertion.

¹ "In sum, under fascism, women's freedom to go out could be compared to the freedom reigning at Pensione Grimaldi, a halfway house with fixed hours, closely watched group routines, and the strictures of newly internalized conventions." Victoria de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 233.

² Most critics recognize the importance and centrality of the fascist setting to *Nessuno torna indietro*. This consensus can be summarized representatively by Carole C. Gallucci, "Alba De Céspedes's *There's No Turning Back*: Challenging the New Woman's Future," in *Mothers of Invention: Women, Italian Fascism, and Culture*, ed. Robin Pickering-Iazzi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 200–19; Sandra Carletti, "'La sponda dell'attesa': Journeys and Rites of Passage in *Nessuno torna indietro*," *Italian Culture* 16/2 (Jan 1998): 173–89; and Marina Zancan, introduction to *Romanzi*, by Alba de Céspedes (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), xi–lxii. Gallucci states that "De Céspedes maneuvers amid dominant discourses [...] counter[ing] prevailing constructions of gender, sex, class, and religion [and] strategically challeng[ing], for instance, the models of the 'New Woman' and the 'crisis woman'" (201); as Carletti explains: "Eight very different stories [...] and as many women typologies are superimposed upon the image of the '*sposa e madre esemplare*' so dear to Fascist propaganda. Collectively, they blur this image beyond recognition" (173); and Zancan asserts: "Il contesto storico-geografico è [...] circostanziato e definito, parte integrante delle esperienze narrate" (lii). One notable exception to what is otherwise critical consensus is found in Maria Assunta Parsani and Neria de Giovanni, *Femminile a confronto: tre realtà della narrativa italiana contemporanea, Alba de Céspedes, Fausta Cialente, Gianna Manzini* (Manduria: Lacaita, 1984). While recognizing that the fascist setting of de Céspedes' text represents "un momento cruciale della nostra vita nazionale," Parsani and de Giovanni determine that the historical setting essentially remains a background element that is brought into the narration only as it is fundamental to the protagonists' private lives and necessary to increasing the reader's understanding of their individual characters (8). For an idea of the aspirations of young women and girls during the *ventennio*, which tended away from traditional domestic life, I refer to the attitudinal survey discussed in de Grazia (*How Fascism Ruled Women*, 119–20) and Bruno Wanrooij, *Storia del pudore: la questione sessuale in Italia, 1860–1940* (Venice: Marsilio, 1990), 215.

³ Valerio Ferme, "Against Marriage and Child-Rearing: Alba de Céspedes' *Nessuno torna indietro* vis-à-vis the Social Framework of Mussolini's Pro-Natal, Pro-Marriage Campaigns of the *Ventennio*," *Italian Quarterly* 43/167–168 (Winter–Spring 2006): 45–57, 45.

During their search, another need becomes clear: that for autonomy from the dominant male figures in their lives, represented by fathers, lovers, suitors and professors.”⁴ While I focus on mother figures in my analysis of de Céspedes’ novel, it is not from the perspective that a maternal role was the only, or even the primary, option for women at the time, despite much fascist rhetoric to the contrary along with the demographic policy that aimed to circumscribe women’s opportunities and relegate them to the domestic sphere. By focusing on mother figures I aim, instead, to examine how de Céspedes plays off the trope of the *sposa e madre esemplare* and how that play opens up new perspectives on paternal and maternal authority in social and affective relationships, as well as in relation to women’s efforts at self-determination. Consideration of maternal figures allows us to see how *Nessuno torna indietro* calls into question traditional ideas of female (pro)creativity and the ways that (pro)creativity was prescribed by paternalistic authority that was often at odds with many women’s personal aspirations and sense of self.

The tension that underlies the entire novel pivots around the efforts of young women in interwar Italy to achieve a measure of self-determination in the context of rigid paternalistic authority, which is embodied in the narrative in the form of various institutions, from the Grimaldi, a convent and boarding house, to the university, to the institution of the family itself. Central to these institutions and their exercise of authority is the role of discourse, particularly spoken discourse. Over the course of this essay I will refer to Michel Foucault’s theories of docile bodies, discursive and discoursing subjectivities, and heterotopias, which provide insight into efforts the forces of power make at regulating discourse and the voice, and to theories of the voice drawn from the film criticism of Michel Chion and Kaja Silverman, which articulate the voice’s ability to exceed and migrate beyond regulatory mechanisms. The voice and vocal power’s quality as a source of establishing subjectivity (positively as active subjecthood and negatively as regulating what one is subject to) is particularly linked in this novel to the maternal voice, as will be explored in the different sections of this essay. Working from the text itself, I will also expand focus on the maternal and the figure of the mother to include the necessary counterparts of the paternal and the father. Since the maternal figures in the novel are mothers without fathers by their side, fathers are characterized as absent, uninvolved, and on the margins, adding to the text’s subversive force. My overall analysis will reveal how, as they are at work in *Nessuno torna indietro*, maternal and paternal elements operate as discursive and performative conventions with particular impact on the characters’ double discursive and discoursing subjectivity.

Subversive “Docile Bodies” in *Nessuno torna indietro*

The importance of discursive subjectivity and authority in the novel is discernable from the opening of *Nessuno torna indietro*. The story begins by introducing the reader into the Grimaldi boarding house, which serves as the residence for the protagonists—young female university students in Rome. The site is described as “una gola oscura” [“a dark throat”] from which is heard “un vocio monotono [...] voci giovani” [“a monotonous murmuring [...] young voices”].⁵

⁴ Carletti, “La sponda dell’attesa,” 173.

⁵ Alba de Céspedes, *Nessuno torna indietro* (Milan: Mondadori, 1944), 9. This and all translations throughout this essay are mine. All further references to this narrative are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by page number. Over the years de Céspedes would revise this novel several times, and the edition published most recently in her collected novels (Milan: Mondadori, 2011) is substantially different from the original 1938 version.

Just as the throat operates as the regulatory membrane that produces, controls, and governs speech and spoken expression, the “gola oscura” of the boarding house functions as the regulatory mechanism that attempts to govern the production, operation, and circulation of speech and conversation among its residents. By way of the nuns who run the boarding house—for it is also a convent—the “gola” is relaxed, permitting more expression or the circulation of that expression (for example, via the telephone), or it is tightened, restricting the residents’ expressive mobility (such as when the electricity is shut off at a particular hour every evening, generally before the students have finished studying for the night). This regulatory system that attempts to control the individual expression of the young women in residence is continually resisted by various students boarding at the Grimaldi. Whether openly by talking back/speaking out or discreetly by circumventing the dominant discourse of permissible expression—thanks to a variety of alternative linguistic registers and discursive modes, such as those of Milly, a music student who, though sighted, can read and write braille, or Vinca, a student from Spain whose native tongue, like braille, eludes comprehension by the Grimaldi’s forces of linguistic control, the nuns—discourse in the boarding house is repeatedly established and subverted, rearticulated and recodified in both senses of the terms: codified *again* as an appropriation of language’s established meaning, and codified *anew* in resistance to and as a resignification of that meaning.

This tension is established in the very first scene when the protagonists are first interpellated through their echo of the rote religious phrase “Così sia” in response to the last words of the nun at the end of the obligatory evening mass (9). The confirmation and acquiescence implied in this phrase, “Let it be so” (or “Amen”), is immediately undermined, however, just outside the confines of the chapel when the young women divest themselves of the role they played during the service: “gettaron via i veli dalla testa e si sciolsero. [...] Il silenzio si mutò in un fitto cicalare, il ridere s’udiva farsi di sommesso via via più franco e ardito. Parlavano di professori, di università, altre si confidavano con occhi ghiotti” [“they tossed the veils from their heads and loosened up. [...] Their silence changed into uninterrupted chatter, their laughter, subdued at first, became more and more frank and bold. They were talking about professors, the university, others were confiding in each other with eager eyes”] (10). Here, a position of disempowerment is marked by silence. In the chapel, the young women comply with the patriarchal authority governing the space, but once the moment of imposed discursive authority is over, they rise from the submissiveness required to become *franche e ardite*, their bold laughter possibly indicating an underlying assertiveness, even aggression, resistance, or transgression. Similar to the humor used among the Turinese working class during the fascist period as described by Luisa Passerini, the laughter here acknowledges the complicity in conformity while also subverting the authority demanding that conformity by mocking its requirements.⁶ The univocality of religious discourse, which invites rote and formulaic responses that are prescribed both temporally, in terms of when they are to be uttered, and formally, in terms of what is to be said, creates a monologic register reminiscent of Mussolinian discourse and fascist rhetoric. The young women of *Nessuno torna indietro* express their desire instead for discursive exchange and dialogue in the “fitto cicalare” [“uninterrupted chatter”] they erupt into as soon as they exit the chapel. The desire for dialogue

The 1944 edition that I cite here, however, does not yet bear any of the author’s significant revisions, which were not first incorporated until the 1952 edition; de Céspedes continued to modify the text periodically with subsequent editions. For the editorial history of the novel, see the *Notizie sui testi* section in the collected volume, Marina Zancan, “Nessuno torna indietro,” in de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, 1611–29.

⁶ Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Paris: Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1987), 86, 90.

and conversation is a recurring theme throughout the novel and the alternative modes the protagonists make recourse to manifest in a variety of ways that allow them to subvert the dominant register of paternal authority, as will be examined throughout this essay. The resistance against monologic communication is also evident in the novel itself and its choral nature, an element much recognized in criticism.⁷

A boarding house constitutes the kind of regulatory space that has been much discussed by Michel Foucault, most extensively in relation to the production of “docile bodies” through discipline.⁸ This production occurs through the operation of disciplinary space and disciplinary time, which, in combination, can structure disciplined activity—such as, in the case of the *pensione* Grimaldi, requiring the boarders to attend Mass, an event that occurs in a prescribed place, at a prescribed time, and, moreover, involves prescribed actions. These disciplinary elements are all at work in the *pensione* Grimaldi, but just as discipline is established by the nuns who run the Grimaldi, who seek continually to establish, reestablish, and maintain their authority and control, their boarders, both in discourse “via via più franco e ardito” [“more and more frank and bold”] and in act through their movement in and out of the Grimaldi and within the house itself, are often beyond the nuns’ full control even while the young women seem to comply. In this way, they end up being subversive “docile bodies” that reshape the discipline that seeks to subdue them, even as they attend to it. While, in an example of disciplinary time, the front door is locked at a particular hour every evening after which the students may not leave (or presumably reenter until the next morning should they not return by curfew), and while the windows of the boarding house are barred and locked as well, the women are able to move freely through the hallways and are able to cross the boundary of the window bars with their voices when they converse with each other from the windows of their respective rooms. The ability of the voice to exceed physical boundaries, thereby subverting the disciplinary space of the boarding house, recalls the power of the *Acousmêtre*, a being whom we hear but do not see, described by Michel Chion in relation to cinema.⁹ The *Acousmêtre*’s disembodied and delocalized voice confers a God-like presence and the qualities of “ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence,” but for Chion, even before God, the universal acousmatic being is the Mother.¹⁰ In *Nessuno torna indietro* acousmatic power is wielded by the young protagonists as well as by the authority figures. When the electricity in the boarding house is turned off at the same time every night, it is announced to the residents in their rooms by *suor* Prudenzina, who, from the corridor, calls out “luce” with a voice “resa monotona dall’abitudine” [“made monotonous by habit”] that sounds like “il lamento delle sirene d’una fabbrica al cessare del lavoro” [“the wail of factory sirens at the end of the work day”] (16). The pervasiveness of voice in the Grimaldi is both liberatory, as it is for the students, and invasive, as is *suor* Prudenzina’s voice. Hers is an impersonal, mechanical, and institutional voice that establishes its

⁷ The choral aspect of *Nessuno torna indietro* is matter-of-factly acknowledged by essentially all criticism as a distinctive feature of the text, as well as of de Céspedes’ style, and for the most part it is viewed positively as giving the characters voice and the opportunity to express themselves, and as an innovation in Italian literature at the time. For a different perspective, according to which the chorality is viewed as “confusione,” “cacofonia,” and “la tradizionale non assertività femminile,” see Maria Rosaria Vitti-Alexander, “Il passaggio del ponte: l’evoluzione del personaggio femminile di Alba de Céspedes,” *Campi immaginabili* 3 (1991): 103–12, 111–12.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977; 2nd ed. repr., New York: Vintage, 1995), 135–69. (Page references are to the 2nd edition reprint.)

⁹ Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, ed. and trans. Claudia Gorbman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 9.

¹⁰ Chion, *The Voice in Cinema*, 24, 27.

authority through sound that penetrates the students' rooms even beyond the closed doors. Closed doors, in fact, provide only the semblance of privacy, for the nuns, as *suor Prudenzina* does during her nightly announcements, often enter the young women's rooms without knocking or asking permission, "violando ogni intimità" ["violating every intimacy"] (160).

Many evenings the protagonists arrange "sottovoce" (32 and *passim*) to meet in someone's room to chat and study together. The Grimaldi (as regulatory system aiming to create disciplined, docile bodies) attempts to govern, surveil, and discourage these gatherings indirectly through shutting off the electricity and also through more direct intervention. When *suor Prudenzina* enters Silvia's room where the protagonists have gathered in the first of these many episodes that take place in the room of one of the young women, the students are already organizing themselves in resistance to the obstacles presented by the nuns. They are furnished with candles and oil lamps by which they will continue to study even after lights-out. *Suor Prudenzina* attempts to intimidate one student, Emanuela, a new arrival, into leaving the room, in an effort to effect the "partitioning" that is characteristic of disciplinary space to break up groups and control communication.¹¹ She is repelled by Silvia, however, who talks back, telling the nun that Emanuela will stay with them that evening. In the face of this defiance of her rule, *suor Prudenzina* attempts to reestablish her authority through amplification when she continues her nightly vocal performance: she retreats back into the hallway beyond the reclosed door, but "[f]uori si udì gridare ancora: 'Luce!'. La 'u' fu più lunga del solito" ["outside she was heard yelling again: 'Lights!' The 'i' was longer than usual"] (18).

Just as they vocally exceed physical boundaries within the walls of the boarding house, the students at the Grimaldi are also able to project their voices beyond the walls themselves and communicate vocally with the outside world by way of the telephone. As with other modes and means of communication, the telephone is a site of the establishment of discursive authority and the subversion of that authority. The telephone at the Grimaldi is kept under lock and key, controlled by the nuns, and the young women must ask permission to use it. The character who best represents these battles for the telephone is Vinca, the student from Spain. Vinca requests to use the telephone each evening to speak to her boyfriend, Luis. Her requests are subject to the approval of *suor Lorenza*, who determines whether or not she feels Vinca's conversation is a "cosa urgente" ["something urgent"] (10) and therefore warrants use of the telephone. Without asking Vinca why she needs to use the phone, *suor Lorenza* seems to arbitrarily decide whether or not to allow her to make a call. On those occasions when Vinca is successful with her request, she takes full advantage of the opportunity by not allowing herself to feel rushed by the nun's impatience (for a nun is present throughout every student's telephone conversation), and by subverting the nun's attempt at audio surveillance by speaking to her boyfriend in Spanish, a language the nun does not understand.

Quando di sera Vinca parlava al telefono, la suora passeggiava impaziente in su e in giù davanti a lei, facendo ciondolare la chiave della stanza per farle intendere che bisognava far presto, si doveva richiudere. Ma la ragazza, per dispetto, si sedeva graziosamente [...] e scorreva senza fretta sorridendo; parlava in spagnolo, gettando a ogni frase un fiotto di parole nel microfono; e intanto fissava la suora con occhio indifferente, senza darle importanza, sicura dietro il suo idioma straniero. (25)

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 143.

[When Vinca would talk on the telephone in the evening, the sister would pace impatiently up and down in front of her, swinging the key to the room to make her understand that she needed to hurry up, the room had to be locked up again. But the girl, out of spite, would sit there gracefully [...] and talk unhurriedly, smiling; she would speak in Spanish, throwing a stream of words into the receiver with each sentence. And meanwhile she would stare indifferently at the sister, without paying her any mind, safe behind her foreign language.]

As a Spanish-speaking subject, Vinca is beyond the nuns' total linguistic control and can thereby establish and enact her own speaking subjectivity, although, admittedly, within the regulatory framework of paternalistic authority in operation at the boarding house.

The Grimaldi, in this sense, is particularly meaningful as a setting, for as a convent it is ostensibly regulated by the paternal authority of the Catholic Church, an institution of men enacting the rule of God the Father.¹² However, the actual operation of authority is performed entirely by women in a wholly female space. This certainly does not mean that the protagonists enjoy more understanding, solidarity, or compassion simply from sharing their gender with the nuns, nor does it suggest that the nuns themselves, in what authority they do have, are able to entirely elude the paternal authority to which they are inevitably bound. That paternal authority is present symbolically and not physically makes it simultaneously all the more powerful and all the more vulnerable to being subverted or undermined. The Grimaldi, thus, is a space of inherently subversive potential in the way it necessarily places tension on paternal(istic) authority existing in an entirely female environment and enacted vocally by female speaking subjects. The discursive tension at work in the novel comes to the fore most immediately in the figure of Emanuela, the character who acts as the catalyst for the novel, which begins with her arrival at the boarding house and ends with her eventual departure from Italy. Emanuela is introduced into the regulatory system of the Grimaldi upon her arrival when *suor* Prudenzina informs her of the prohibition against the use of lipstick, telling her, “‘Via quella roba dalla bocca’ accennando al rosso sulle labbra” [“‘Get that stuff off your mouth,’” motioning at the red on her lips”] (12). Lipstick’s transgressive quality and the threat it poses to a paternalistic discursive system seems clear: lipstick quite literally highlights the mouth as a site of controversy and control. The non-permitted/illicit “roba” referred to in relation to Emanuela’s mouth can thus also be understood as the sort of discourse a woman with red-painted lips would speak from the mouth she chooses to call attention to. In the boarding house, as in the monologic paternalistic order, the (female) mouth is to remain discreet, bland, and benign both in appearance and utterance. Some of the young women subvert this attitude by wearing lipstick outside of the Grimaldi, thereby presenting only the semblance of obedience when within view of the nuns, by continuing their conversations from the windows of their rooms where their voices can move beyond walls and closed doors, and even by furtively smoking at the windows in their rooms late at night. The importance of these boundary or transition spaces, windows and doorways, in relation to what happens or does not happen at the site of the protagonists’ mouths calls attention to what Kaja Silverman has termed “the migratory potential of the voice.”¹³

¹² For discussion on the parallels between the Church’s view on women and the fascist regime’s views on women in the context of this novel, see Gallucci, “Alba di Céspedes’s *There’s No Turning Back*,” 204–5.

¹³ Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 84.

The intangible nature of the voice makes it difficult to regulate and contain and, as Silverman explains, makes it a target for regulatory forces that find the voice problematic because of its ability to exceed, to surpass fixed boundaries, and to circulate uncontrollably. In this we can understand the fear facing and power underlying the mouth as a site of (un)controlled utterance in de Céspedes' novel. This is particularly relevant in the relation of utterance to subjectivity when subjectivity is understood as being double: being both a subject with individual (uttering) agency and a subject who is subject to rules (governing allowable/unallowable utterances). This type of double subjectivity resonates with Foucault's elaborations in "The Subject and Power," according to which being a subject is at once a position of self-determination and of being under another's control.¹⁴ In another essay, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," Foucault explains how the simultaneous duality suggested here can be imagined in relation to discourse by thinking of discourse as a *space* in which there are discoursing and discursive subjects: "Discourse is not a place into which the subjectivity irrupts; it is a space [in which subjectivity is created according to] differentiated subject-positions and subject-functions."¹⁵ Furthermore, this is not a single-event creation of subjectivity, by which the subject would be created discursively and then be constituted forever as created; rather, it is an ongoing operation, for "discoursing subjects form part of the discursive field" in which they have "their possibilities" and "their function."¹⁶ Thus, while discursive subjects are regulated by the discursive field, as discoursing subjects they can alter that field, and not just maintain it.

Maternalizing Discourse

Given that the Grimaldi is also a convent run by a *Madre superiora*, if we now recall the opening scene of the novel, we can note that it is through the maternal voice that the young boarders are first interpellated for the reader and are called into subjectivity within the novel: at the nun's final words, the students respond aloud "Così sia." It is not explicitly stated that the *Madre superiora* is the person who initiates the young women's response, but this should not be troubling for our reading. The *Madre superiora* is the supreme authority at the Grimaldi and it is arguable that those declarations made by her *suore* are made in her name, as is, in fact, often the case with *suor* Lorenza, who seems always to act according to the *Madre's* will. In fact, *suor* Lorenza's particular strategy of acting in the Mother's name demonstrates, as I will explore at greater length in the next section of this essay, how by acting as "mother" one can be or become "Mother."

Since the primary mother who serves as the discursive authority is a mother of the Church rather than the mother of a family acquired through sex and childbirth, the figure of the mother is established as both deeply entrenched in millennia-old tradition and somehow contested.¹⁷ While the Church is an institution within which women traditionally do not represent authority, the creation of an all-female totalitarian-inspired space—circumscribed as this space may be, indeed, its circumscription is part of what leads de Grazia to view it as microcosm of fascist Italy—sets the stage for reconsideration of traditional roles and structures beyond whatever prescriptions

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 208–26, 211–12.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*, ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 53–72, 58.

¹⁶ Foucault, "Politics and the Study of Discourse," 58.

¹⁷ Throughout the fascist period, when this novel was written and set, the ongoing contestations between the State and the Church about which entity exercised ultimate authority would have been well known to readers.

male authority figures may have desired to create. Much as fascist organizations that sought to prescribe female roles simultaneously had the inadvertent effect of providing “new opportunities [alongside] new repression,” the casting of a “virginal” mother draws authority from a longstanding paternal tradition while also rendering unstable and revisable the role of “mother” in general and calling attention to how deeply “mother” is a role and motherhood is a set of performed behaviors and relations rather than just a name and quality determined solely and simply through giving birth to a child.¹⁸ As discussed later in this essay, the figure of boarder Emanuela, an unwed mother, illustrates that a woman may be assigned the role of mother through childbirth, but a woman only *is* a mother if she performs accordingly through proper maternal behavior and discourse.

The maternal voice as producer of discourse will be singularly reexamined, finally, through the figure of Augusta, who offers an image of mother in a woman antipathetic toward men and convinced of their non-necessity in general. This character further undermines the traditional notion that woman-as-mother is defined specifically and only in relation to being biologically created as such by man and because of her relation to and with man. Augusta’s activity as a writer additionally serves to reimagine the mother as interpellator when we consider the audience for whom Augusta writes: other women she hopes to enlighten. Augusta’s writing, in both form (the fact that she writes) and content (the message she aims to communicate), recasts the subject-making potential of the mother’s voice and the discourse it generates.

The three characters noted here—*suor* Lorenza, Emanuela, and Augusta—present three different kinds of mothers offering three varied perspectives on the maternal role and the responsibilities, behaviors, and discourse entailed in acting or performing as mother.¹⁹ And in negotiating and recasting traditional conceptions of mother(hood) according to their own desires for self-determination, they also necessarily call into question traditional notions of father(hood) and the father’s purview.

The Paternalistic Mother: Suor Lorenza

The *Madre superiora* at the beginning of the novel is a figure of absence, of inactivity or inagency, and of disinterest. This *Madre* is isolated and disconnected from the world around her and even from her home environment: she does not pray anymore, she sits in her room and is visible only during Mass when she is escorted to the chapel and then directly back to her room. Her only independent action or sign of initiative is in her surreptitious smuggling of incense and candles from the chapel to her room (50). Although she is a woman, as *Madre superiora* in a Catholic order, she is actually the figure of paternal authority and the Law of the Father, an

¹⁸ The paradoxical effect of fascist efforts at prescribing gender roles, which imposed further limitations at the same time that they opened new horizons and created new opportunities, was perhaps most famously explored by de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*.

¹⁹ Although these are the only three “maternal” figures I will discuss in this essay I do not by any means consider them to be exhaustive illustrations of the potential reimaginings of “mother” de Céspedes offers in this novel. For example, among the other characters in the novel, Xenia could be considered alongside Emanuela as another iteration of the “resistant” mother, and Silvia could be explored in comparison and contrast to Augusta as a different type of “intellectual” mother. As the scope of this essay prohibits me from fully exploring additional possible mother-figures discernable in *Nessuno torna indietro*, I have chosen to present the three figures noted to provide what I hope will be an innovative rereading of two traditional types of mother and to propose a decidedly non-traditional yet still credible third possible mother type.

authority that seems emptied out, for all that seems to exist of this paternalistic *madre* is empty gesture.

The active and actual wielder of authority, in fact, is *suor* Lorenza, who commands the Grimaldi from behind the scenes. *Suor* Lorenza appropriates the figure of the *Madre superiora* to her advantage by claiming always to act in the name of the Mother while keeping the entitled *Madre* ignorant of what are ostensibly her orders, and secluded from the young women who board at the Grimaldi. *Suor* Lorenza's maternal command is concentrated on power and her ability to exercise control—particularly, the control of discourse. *Suor* Lorenza is the one Vinca must ask permission of when she wants to use the telephone; the keys to the Grimaldi, from the one for the front door to the one for the telephone, are in her possession; when students first arrive at the boarding house to begin their studies in Rome, or leave it, usually after marriage or graduation, it is through arrangements communicated with *suor* Lorenza, initially through correspondence and ultimately, generally, in conversation.

Era lei ad aprire la posta al mattino. Ragazze scrivevano da ogni parte d'Italia, dall'estero anche. Ella rispondeva con una calligrafia chiara, invitante, con tenerezza materna; e quando quelle avevano risposto che accettavano, venivano, ella ripeteva molte volte il loro nome tra sé, poi bruscamente lo trasformava in un numero, ripeteva nome, cognome, numero. Quando una nuova ragazza giungeva e la campanella la chiamava al parlatorio, lei si acconciava in capo il velo, specchiandosi nel vetro della finestra, si chiedeva, ansiosa: 'Come sarà? come sarà?', poi entrava, le parlava con contenuta dolcezza. Ma non parlava mai in prima persona: era sempre 'la superiora che [...] la superiora vuole [...] dirò alla superiora che [...]', lasciando immaginare misteriosi colloqui tra lei e la vecchia badessa. Godeva vedendo che la nuova arrivata, ascoltandola, osservava le sue labbra, le sue mani fini, la figura alta, snella. (51–52)

[She was the one who opened the mail in the morning. Girls would write from all over Italy, from abroad too. She would respond in clear, inviting handwriting, with maternal tenderness; and when the girls replied that they accepted, they were coming, she would repeat their names to herself many times, then brusquely transform each into a number. She would repeat first name, last name, number. When a new girl would arrive and the bell called her to the parlor, she would arrange the veil on her head, checking her reflection in the windowpane, and she would ask herself, anxious: "What will she be like? What will she be like?" Then she would enter, and she would talk to her with contained sweetness. But she would never speak in the first person, it was always "Mother Superior who [...] Mother Superior wants [...] I'll tell Mother Superior that [...]," letting mysterious conversations between her and the old abbess be imagined. She enjoyed seeing that the new arrival, while listening to her, would observe her lips, her delicate hands, her tall, thin figure.]

Suor Lorenza takes possession of each new arrival's name just as she does the name of the *Madre* and so enfolds the residents at the Grimaldi within her discursive control. She is, effectively, creating her own alternative matrilineal line, recording the genealogy in the boarding house's register. Although another bears the name "Mother," it is *suor* Lorenza who acts as

“Mother,” and her performance as such is decidedly self-conscious, for she is aware of her audience, the young women she calls “figliole mie” [“my children”] (10 and *passim*).

Suor Lorenza’s motherhood is so directly tied to her role as discursive and discouraging authority that when one of the young women, Xenia, leaves unexpectedly, without even sending word after her departure, *suor* Lorenza cancels Xenia from the discursive field of the Grimaldi, crossing out her name in the boarding house’s register: “Costantini, Xenia. Scrisse la data, 2 dicembre 1934. Poi cancellò nome e cognome con due linee diritte, la penna intinta nell’inchostro rosso” [“Costantini, Xenia. She wrote the date, December 2, 1934. Then she crossed out first name and last name with two straight lines, the pen dipped in red ink”] (56). “Xenia Costantini” is no longer utterable or speakable, and so is effaced from the Grimaldi’s discursive field. The effacement’s allusion to a sort of death by silence is evident from the “inchostro rosso” with which the name is struck, as though by a fatal blow. We can also presume that it is likely *suor* Lorenza who also enters a young woman’s name into the register upon her arrival at the Grimaldi, thus entering her into the boarding house’s discursive field in a generative act and signaling the creation of each new boarder’s subjectivity within the space of the *pensione*.

The essentialness of interpellation to subjectivity is reiterated after *suor* Lorenza becomes *Madre superiora* in name as well as act. When the previous *Madre superiora* finally retires and goes to Genoa “dove stavano tutte le monache vecchie aspettando di morire” [“where all the old nuns were, waiting to die”] (182), *suor* Lorenza takes over the office and title. This ascension to what would seem to be unobstructed power is, however, neither self-affirming nor self-realizing. While as “*suor* Lorenza” she was the authority of all discourse, as “*Madre superiora*” she has ceased to be a discouraging subject for “[n]essuno veniva più a chiamar[la]” [“no one came to call for her anymore”] (253). In this woman-driven novel, the closer a person gets to a position of traditional patriarchal authority, the further she actually is from effective authority. She has achieved the title she desired, but in so doing has had to assume the role as well, a role characterized by—and this is in no small part due to her own manipulations and subterfuges as “*suor* Lorenza”—seclusion, inagency, and disconnection. Whereas before she was a source of spoken subjectivity, “[a]desso [...] quando la madre entra nel refettorio le ragazze tacciono” [“now [...] when the Mother Superior enters the refectory the girls stop talking”] (344). In achieving the position of supreme authority she goes from being the force of discursivity to the force of its silencing. She becomes increasingly paranoid that the other nuns are trying to subvert her and her position, just as she did to the *Madre* before her (345), but ultimately, she sinks into the role of *Madre* at the Grimaldi and becomes a counterpart to the *Madre* she invoked previously. Her descent into silence is strongly linked to the gradual departure of the protagonists from the Grimaldi, the last group of arrivals she welcomed to the boarding house as the active and authoritative *suor* Lorenza. As Emanuela describes, “Neppure conosce le nuove che sono arrivate. È rimasta ferma a noi, al nostro gruppo, all’ultimo, insomma, che lei ha accolto in parlatorio. [...] Sta lì seduta e aspetta che venga il suo turno di andare a Genova per morire” [“She doesn’t even know the new girls that have arrived. She’s stuck at us, our group, the last, basically, that she welcomed in the parlor. [...] She sits there and waits for her turn to come to go to Genoa to die”] (436). As those she inaugurated into discursive and discouraging subjectivity leave the boarding house one after the other—an inauguration that, tellingly, took place in the “parlatorio,” with its etymological and cultural link to conversation—*suor* Lorenza, now *Madre superiora*, sees more and more of her own subjectivity fade away as she becomes further and further removed from potential sites of discourse (in the form of conversation with those students

she does know, for example). Her final silence will meet her in Genoa as it did her *Madre* before her.

The Resistant Mother: Emanuela

The sense of disconnection between parent and child is most evident in the character of Emanuela, the only biological mother among the protagonists of the novel. As a young woman of the generation that was coming of age during fascist rule, Emanuela could be considered a model of the new mother so desired by fascism, and cast in this role, she engages directly with the figure of the *sposa e madre esemplare*. Because of one crucial difference, however, any attempt to identify “fascist” maternity in the figure of Emanuela is immediately undermined and the transgressive nature of her character is reinforced: Emanuela’s maternity is unrecognized by her community because she gave birth to her daughter, Stefania, out of wedlock. Furthermore, she is not just an unrecognized mother for fear of public scorn, she is also an unrecognized mother due to her lack of any feelings of “natural” motherliness and the lack of connection she feels to being “mother.” The biologically determinist concept that woman was, more than anything else, naturally “mother”—a concept prevalent during the period in which the novel was written and set when fascism’s traditional attitudes on gender roles manifested in rhetoric and policy—is thus directly challenged by the figure of Emanuela. The experience of childbirth makes Emanuela “mother” (or “mamma”) discursively, at least, but de Céspedes’ representation of Emanuela’s interactions with her daughter dismantles the notion that the birth of her child signals the realization of any natural maternal abilities and character; for Emanuela, rather, childbirth imposed the role of “mother” upon her. The first time her daughter called her “mamma,” “restò lì in un improvviso stupore, pensando ‘Mamma sono io’ e tuttavia non le sembrava vero” [“She remained there in sudden astonishment, thinking ‘I’m Mommy,’ and yet it didn’t seem real to her”] (47). In an interesting reversal of the traditional paradigm, here the child attempts to interpellate the mother as such, and yet “mamma” does not “turn” in response to the call as Louis Althusser would have it, nor does she take on the identity in “self-knowledge” per Foucault.²⁰ She does not recognize herself as “mamma,” and “mother” is not an inherent identity for the development of this female character.

The potential for a woman’s resistance to motherhood as a responsibility and “mother” as a role is incisively illustrated when Emanuela buys her daughter a doll and remembers her own childhood awkwardness with dolls and “playing mother.” The scene is so vivid it is worth citing at length:

La bambola al negozio pareva viva; in camera Emanuela la trasse dalla scatola, la prese in braccio, la strinse a sé, la scostò, la contemplò: era splendida; tornò ad abbracciarla credendo così di suscitare in sé un po’ di tenerezza, ma restò freddissima. Si ricordava che da bambina le accadeva lo stesso. S’estasiava davanti alla vetrina, affascinata, e, avuta la bambola, la portava a casa in braccio, fieramente; ma quando la mamma le diceva: — Gioca — e la lasciava sola con lei, non sapeva che farne. [...] — Stupida! — Emanuela le diceva piano. — Stupida! — Questo era il solo loro colloquio. [...] Qualche volta veniva

²⁰ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards an Investigation,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 85–126; Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 212.

un'amichetta a trovarla, subito Emanuela le proponeva di giocare con la bambola, era curiosa di sapere come facessero le altre a divertirsi con quella cosa di stoffa e porcellana. Quella cominciava a parlare alla bambola con una strana voce in falsetto, poi con mani abili la spogliava, la rivestiva, non sentiva ribrezzo di quella morta nudità. Anche Emanuela allora provava, ma subito doveva smettere; non sapeva trarre fuori una simile voce, i suoi gesti erano maldestri e non si divertiva. L'amica scuoteva il capo: — Non sei una vera mamma, tu; si capisce che è un gioco. (75–76)

[At the store the doll seemed alive; in her room, Emanuela took it out of the box, held it in her arms, hugged it to her, held it away, and looked it over. It was wonderful. She hugged it again thinking she'd arouse some tenderness in herself that way, but she remained frigid. She remembered that the same thing would happen to her when she was a little girl. She was enraptured in front of the shop window, fascinated, and once the doll was had, she would carry it home in her arms proudly. But when her mom would say to her "Go play" and would leave it alone with her, she didn't know what to do with it. [...] "Stupid!" Emanuela would say to it softly. "Stupid!" This was their only conversation. Sometimes a little friend would come to visit, and Emanuela would immediately suggest they play with the doll; she was curious to know what other little girls did to have fun with that porcelain and fabric thing. Her friend would start to talk to the doll with a strange falsetto voice, then with capable hands she would undress it, redress it, she wasn't disgusted by that dead nudity. Emanuela would try too, then, but she would have to quit immediately. She wasn't able to pull out a similar voice, her gestures were clumsy, and she wasn't having fun. Her friend would shake her head: "You're not a real mommy, you can tell that it's a game."]

Motherhood, and "mother," as portrayed here is most decidedly a performance at both the discursive and gestural levels. "Mother" discourse is essential to the proper performance of the role, as is one's awareness of being observed as "mother": when going home with her doll young Emanuela is "fiera" to be seen with it by passersby, but once alone with it she is lost. Motherhood for her is not instinct but imitation, and even then, it is unconvincing for both her audience and herself. She is not manifesting innate qualities but putting on prescribed behavior. It is believed that little girls like to play with a (baby)doll, but de Céspedes' portrayal of Emanuela's experience reveals that for some girls (and women), "mother"ing is play-acting.

Dolls and toys will prove again to be essential to Emanuela's performance as a biological mother. Upon Emanuela's first visit to her daughter at the girl's boarding school in Rome, another convent, Stefania asks Emanuela if she has brought her any toys or at least sweets as "tutte le mamme" do and as the nuns told Stefania her mother would (42). This request acts as Stefania's discursive constitution of herself as daughter and of Emanuela as mother; at the girl's boarding school, the mother-daughter relationship is established, enacted, and performed via this transaction. The interpellative exchange is meant to be mirrored by a corresponding commodity exchange that would act as affirmation and sanction of their mother-child relationship. When Emanuela must admit that she brought neither toys nor sweets, Stefania is visibly disappointed and repeats "Tutte le mamme portano i dolci" ["All the mommies bring sweets"] as a rebuke. Emanuela has clearly failed in her role as mother by not performing appropriately like "tutte le

mamme,” and mother and daughter are left without anything further to say to each other (44). When she finally says goodbye to her daughter, it is with the promise of bringing both toys and sweets on her next visit.

From then on, the scenes of Emanuela-as-mother generally involve her buying toys for or presenting toys and gifts to her daughter. It is only through the gestures of shopping, buying, and giving objects that she is able to express herself as “mother.” Her commercial generosity toward her daughter is not the sign of increased maternal sentiment, but an indication that she has learned that this is what “tutte le mamme” do, she has learned the role of “mamma.” The mother-daughter relationship between Emanuela and Stefania remains throughout the novel a performance of commodity-exchange. Once the parts have been played and the dialogue recited, the show falls into awkward silence: “‘Che ti porto’, ‘che mi porti’. Appena Stefania aveva preso il pacco ed Emanuela gliel’aveva dato non avevano più nulla da fare insieme” [“‘What will I bring you?’ ‘What will you bring me?’ As soon as Stefania had taken the package and Emanuela had given it to her, they had nothing more to do together”] (166). The objectification of their relatability emphasizes the (e)strange(d)ness of their relationship and draws attention to its quality as discursive “performance.”

Emanuela’s performative mothering is additionally evident through the site-specificity inherent to her identity as “mother.” Mother and daughter meet only once a week, during their brief Sunday visits at Stefania’s boarding school. They never exit the school and so are never seen in public together, and Emanuela creates a pretense for her regular Sunday outings to keep her friends ignorant of Stefania’s existence. Similar to the confining of theatrical performance to the space and time of the theater, the localization of Emanuela’s motherhood in both time and place results in her feeling that “[l]a sua maternità esisteva solamente dietro la porta di quel collegio [...] le bastava di uscire di lì per liberarsene” (166). Mothering is represented for Emanuela as an affectation, a staging that is dependent upon role-playing in a particular space, at a particular time, for a particular audience. The role of mother is one that she has not incorporated but one that remains compartmentalized spatially and linguistically, and one that she could divest herself of entirely were Stefania to cease to exist. This is, in fact, a fantasy she indulges in when her daughter falls ill with *scarlettina*: “se Stefania moriva era come se non fosse stata mai viva. Per chi era viva quella bambina? Per nessuno, e quindi non esisteva” [“if Stefania died it was as if she had never lived. For whom was that little girl alive? For no one, and therefore she didn’t exist”] (285). If Stefania is never spoken of as Emanuela’s daughter, if she does not exist discursively in the world as Emanuela’s daughter, does she exist as such at all? In the novel, even though the child’s existence remains unacknowledged openly in Emanuela’s social world, and even though it is not a sign of maternal feeling, Stefania exists solely in relation to her mother; Stefania is not an individual subject but a derivative whose existence or inexistence is only meaningful to the primary source (her mother). The girl’s individual subjectivity, perhaps, is not actually constituted until the moment when she is called into existence *a voce alta* by Emanuela when she finally tells her new fiancé, Andrea, about Stefania. “Si smarrì e le labbra ebbero un tremito convulso, angosciata mormorò, come se soltanto allora [al momento di raccontare tutto a voce alta] sentisse tutta la gravità del fatto” [“She felt troubled and her lips trembled convulsively. Anguished, she murmured, as though only then (at that moment of saying everything out loud) did she feel the gravity of the situation”] (412). It is only in the moment in which she has to speak “Stefania,” speak of Stefania and generate her discursively, that her daughter and her own role of “mother” seem to become real. The spasm of

her mouth in the telling highlights the tension she feels in the process of producing “mother” discourse.

The alienation evident between mothers (both metaphorical and biological) and daughters is paralleled by a similar sentimental and linguistic distance between daughters and their fathers. Fathers in the novel are few and far between, but the two principal fathers introduced are related to Emanuela: *Signor Andori*, her father, and Stefano Mirovich, the father of her child. Stefano, as a military pilot, would seem to potentially be a model new father for the generation that came of age under the fascist regime. And yet his fatherhood, like Emanuela’s motherhood, is characterized by an insuperable distance between himself and his child. In this case, it is his death before her birth that will keep Stefania from ever knowing her father, as Stefano dies in an airplane crash before even discovering he was to be a father. Emanuela’s father, while still alive, is almost equally distant. Much like the secluded and paternalistic figurehead of the *Madre superiora*, *Signor Andori* is represented as spending all his time alone in his study among his books. He sits in his armchair that faces the window, and so he sits with his back to the rest of the house and his family, and is similarly discursively detached: “non chiamava mai nessuno, nessuno doveva entrare quando egli stava nello studio” [“he never called for anyone, no one was supposed to enter when he was in his study”] (47). And when Emanuela, at the beginning of her relationship with Stefano, before the point of no return of their first sexual encounter, expected paternal inquiry into her late arrivals at home, that inquiry never came. The questions she expects her father to pose—“che hai fatto, dove sei stata?” [“what did you do, where were you?”]—are never spoken, her father only asks her where the book is that she was supposed to pick up for him while she was out (103). Her father may consume discourse in the form of the books he reads, but he does not produce it in conversation with his family. In the novel, fathers and paternal figures, whether through death or disinterest, are distant, non-discoursing, and silent.

The Novel-ist Mother: Augusta

The least traditional of the three maternal figures discussed in this essay is represented by the student Augusta. Augusta is the oldest student at the boarding house; none of the other students know how long she has been there, nor exactly how old she is. She is characterized immediately by her particularity, especially in relation to the non-traditional discourses she is able to articulate and through which she interpellates and inaugurates non-traditional subjects. Her capacity for motherly tenderness is evident in her relationship with her pet turtle, Margherita, which she talks about “quasi [se] parlasse di una bambina” [“almost (as though) she were talking about a child”] (29) and to which she dedicates care and affection (59, 392). Maternal affection and attention also develop in her relationship with another boarder, Valentina, whom Augusta takes to calling “cara” (422, 424, 426); their friendship of mutual support and companionship in which Augusta enjoys an “autorevole prestigio che le derivava dalla maggiore età” [“authoritative prestige that she derived from being older”] (426) seems to presage the mother-daughter relationship model of “affidamento” that would be significant in Italian feminism as it developed in the 1970s. Her generative abilities are displayed during the *seduta di spiritismo* the protagonists arrange upon Augusta’s suggestion. During the *seduta*, she calls into being a ghostly spirit and then seeks to call it by name (92–98). On these occasions Augusta demonstrates a novel interest in figures of “secondary” status, figures beneath or beyond the attention of dominant and mainstream discourse, in engaging such figures in conversation and interpellating them into the discursive register, and, by doing so, in giving voice and subjectivity to those who

are generally considered to be without either. The danger this generative power poses to the established order is evident in the spirit she is able to conjure and communicate with: a man. Though her philosophical and sociopolitical alliances lie with women, Augusta is responsible for introducing a male presence into the female-only space of the Grimaldi, and act that marks her as transgressive and groundbreaking.

This desire to act as spokesperson or advocate seems compatible with envisioning the mother as caretaker and generatrix, and is also evident in the motivation for and theme of Augusta's "great novel." Augusta is not at the Grimaldi, it turns out, in order to study, but in order to write, and she has arrived at the point of writing "un romanzo di tipo universale [nel quale] dimostro che se li sopportiamo [gli uomini] è soltanto per crearci una situazione sociale, non per attrazione del sesso" ["a universal kind of novel (in which) I show that if we tolerate them (men) it is only in order to create a social situation for ourselves, not out of sexual attraction"] (255). She aims to write a politically engaged novel that will reveal to all women the ways in which heterosexuality and heterosexual relations (both erotic and platonic) operate as a political institution that oppresses women. She believes her book will be revolutionary and enlightening, opening women's eyes to their oppressed condition and creating a new female genealogy that is distinctly matrilineal. Indeed, Augusta is Sardinian and is inspired by the literary model of Grazia Deledda (158). Her politicization of gender relations also brings to mind the theories of Adrienne Rich, most particularly with respect to Rich's concept of the "lesbian continuum."²¹ In her declaration of the necessity of woman's autonomy from man, and of man's non-necessity to woman in general, Augusta seems to represent a woman whose experiences are analogous to those of Rich's lesbian continuum, which is meant to indicate "a range [...] of woman-identified experience [...] without a necessary sexual component."²²

Augusta's understanding of how sexual relations complicate subjectivity, especially, in the novel, for women, is evident from her perspective on marriage and from the depiction of male-female couples in the novel itself. Heterosexual pairings in the novel involve the distinct process of subsumption: the woman is subsumed into the identity of the man in a behavioral manifestation of the patrilineal authority that is ultimately marked by the *cognome*. Several scenes in the novel illustrate this process of gradual subsumption and effacement. When Emanuela goes for walks with her fiancé, Andrea Lanziani, he conducts her, steers her through the streets and even in conversation: "obbligava Emanuela a seguirlo, a dire ciò che egli voleva" ["he obliged her to follow him, to say what he wanted (her to say)"] (137). He even appropriates her name, calling her "Nuela" (161 and *passim*). While this can be read as affectionate, it also illustrates how the woman's subjectivity can begin to be (insidiously) filtered through that of the man without her consent. The appropriation of the male identity can occur at the woman's initiative, too, as is the case for Vinca who seems to transform into Luis after he marries another

²¹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Experience (1980)," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979–1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 23–75, 51. Interpretations of Augusta as representative of "lesbian possibilities" are most common in American criticism; see especially Gallucci, "Alba De Céspedes's *There's No Turning Back*"; Ellen Nerenberg "'Donna proprio ... proprio donna': The Social Construction of Femininity in *Nessuno torna indietro*," *RLA: Romance Languages Annual* 3 (1991): 267–73; and Robin Pickering-Iazzi, "The Sexual Politics of the Migrational City in *Nessuno torna indietro*," in Carole C. Gallucci and Ellen Nerenberg, ed., *Writing Beyond Fascism: Cultural Resistance in the Life and Works of Alba de Céspedes* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2000), 85–109. When asked about Augusta's possible lesbianism in an interview, de Céspedes was adamant that it was not the case (Piera Carroli, *Esperienza e narrazione nella scrittura di Alba de Céspedes* [Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1993], 182).

²² Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 51.

woman. She dresses in his clothes, puts his architectural drawings up on the walls, and attempts to cast herself in the space/place of “Luis” to the point that “forse in certi momenti ella stessa non sapeva se era Vinca o Luis” [“maybe in certain moments she herself didn’t know if she was Vinca or Luis”] (433). It is interesting to also remember that Vinca, being Spanish, would have likely had a last name that traditionally would trace her maternal descent as well as her paternal affiliation. In the novel, however, perhaps as a presage of how she ends up engulfed in Luis’ identity, she is known only by her paternal last name, Ortiz.

Augusta’s perceptive awareness of how, in heterosexual coupling, a woman’s individual identity could become assimilated into or engulfed by the identity of the man is clear in her warnings to Emanuela about marrying. And in this admonition, her words seem to be a harbinger of Rich’s later questioning of the “male right of access to women” (52):

Senti: tu ti sposi. Ebbene, non avrai più un momento per te; più nulla di tuo, neppure il tuo nome, anche un tuo figlio sarà suo, gli dovrai tutto, perderai la tua personalità, sarai soltanto la moglie del signor Lanziani, egli avrà il diritto di sapere ogni tuo pensiero, e se glie lo nasconderai sarà un tradimento, avrà il diritto di entrare nella tua stanza anche di notte, di metterti le mani addosso a ogni ora del giorno se vuole, guardarti mentre ti pettini, mentre dormi, ti dirà ‘usciamo’ e tu dovrai seguirlo. E tutto ciò che finora è stato solamente tuo non t’apparterrà più [...]. (257–58)

[Listen, you get married. Well, you won’t have a moment for yourself anymore, nothing of your own anymore, not even your name. Even a child of yours will be his, you’ll owe him everything, you’ll lose your personality, you’ll only be Mr. Lanziani’s wife. He’ll have the right to know your every thought, and if you hide it from him it will be a betrayal. He’ll have the right to come into your room even at night, to put his hands on you any time of day if he wants to, to watch you while you brush your hair, while you sleep, he’ll tell you “We’re going out” and you’ll have to follow him. And everything that up until now has been only yours won’t belong to you anymore.]

Augusta is cognizant of the essentialness of autonomy—of thought, of space, of subjectivity (symbolized especially by one’s name)—to creativity and production, especially for women. In this way, the Grimaldi operates for her as a Woolfian room of one’s own in which she can (re)produce on her own terms. Perhaps those who consider the generative act of writing as harmonious with childbirth will recognize that this is possible not just for men, who are biologically incapable of pregnancy, but also for women.²³ For Augusta, motherhood is in the

²³ For an entirely different view of the “generative” aspect of Augusta-as-writer, see Zancan’s introduction to de Céspedes’ collected *Romanzi*, and Nerenberg, ““Donna proprio ... proprio donna.”” Zancan aligns Augusta with sterility, calling her writing “un immaginario poetico *sterile* perché sostitutivo di ogni esperienza” (de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, xix, emphasis added). Saveria Chemotti also sees in Augusta a “sterilità di donna.” Saveria Chemotti, *L’inchostro bianco: madri e figlie nella narrativa italiana contemporanea* (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2009), 91. And Nerenberg, instead of viewing writing as potentially *procreative* for both men and women, sees the activity of writing as physically all-consuming, and thus incompatible for biological procreativity, for both of the characters in the novel whom she considers women writers—Silvia and Augusta. In her discussion of their passion for and dedication to writing Nerenberg sees such activity as “de-eroticizing” and “defeminizing” of these two characters, thus serving to distance them even further from any possibilities for biological procreation (their respective

page, not her body, and discursive subjectivity occurs in generative authorship rather than generative biology. Augusta can thus also be read as presenting a challenge to the father's biological authority in how she aims to establish a female genealogy that is not dependent on biological reproduction.²⁴

Most critics tend to view Augusta as the “failed intellectual.”²⁵ As one of the few protagonists who are never identified by a last name, Augusta has been seen this way by Marina Zancan, who interprets her lack of a *cognome* as a sign of her overall failure.²⁶ However, since the *cognome* in Italian culture at the time was a mark of patrilineality, I view her “missing” last name as subversion of traditional paternal biological authority. Without a *cognome*, what Augusta is lacking is an identifiable link to a male figure—be he father or husband—who would be her social, political, and cultural superior.²⁷ That she is unidentifiable by last name places her outside the sphere of cultural intelligibility and could be read as signaling her resistance to male-controlled hierarchy, paternal authority, and heteronormativity. Despite reading Augusta's missing last name as a defect in the character, Zancan also recognizes the negative valence of the *cognome* in the novel:

La prima formulazione del cognome avviene sempre, nella trama romanzesca, in un contesto di ostilità esteriore o di disagio interiore: Xenia è la ‘signorina Costantini’ nelle parole del professor Trecca che la respinge alla laurea; Silvia è ‘la Custo’ per il professor Belluzzi; Emanuela è la mamma della ‘bambina Andori’; Vinca, ‘la Ortiz’, è così nominata da suor Lorenza, dopo l’abbandono del collegio; Anna, in Puglia, è ‘la Bortone’, la figlia dei padroni. L’acquisizione del cognome, pertanto, pur declinando l’identità anagrafica del personaggio, non attesta il possesso di una individualità matura, ma segnala piuttosto il difficile impatto tra le attese delle giovani donne e la rigidità dei ruoli sociali.²⁸

[In the novel's plot, the first formulation of the last name always happens in a context of external hostility or internal unease: Xenia is “Miss Costantini” in the words of Professor Trecca who rejects her for her degree; Silvia is “Custo” for

“physical unattractiveness”—Silvia—and “lesbianism”—Augusta—being, evidently, primary factors standing between them and any potential heterosexual, and thus biologically procreative, coupling) (269–71).

²⁴ This kind of non-biological female genealogy can arguably be seen to have found some expression later in the concept of *affidamento* that emerges from the feminist movement in Italy in the 1970s.

²⁵ See, for example, Parsani and De Giovanni, *Femminile a confronto*, 19; Nerenberg, “Donna proprio ... proprio donna,” 267; Gallucci, “Alba de Céspedes's *There's No Turning Back*,” 209; Laura Fortini, “Nessuno torna indietro di Alba de Céspedes,” in *Letteratura italiana: le opere*, vol. 4, bk. 2: *Il Novecento: La ricerca letteraria*, ed. Alberto Asor Rosa (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), 137–66, 151; Alessandra Rabitti, “Donne che scrivono: le protagoniste dei romanzi,” in Marina Zancan, ed., *Alba de Céspedes* (Milan: Fondazione Arnoldo e Alberto Mondadori, 2005), 124–41, 125–26, 140; Chemotti, *L'inchiestro bianco*, 91; Zancan, introduction to de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, xix.

²⁶ Zancan, introduction to de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, xviii.

²⁷ Giancarlo Lombardi discusses the role of the last name in similar terms in relation to one of de Céspedes' later novels, *Quaderno proibito* (1952), in which the female protagonist's shedding of her last name allows her also to shed the social relations that bind her: “Gone is the family name, which symbolically binds her to the *Law of the Father*, gone are the relational ties that, until then, had established her identity: Bebe for her parents, Mammà for her husband and children, Pisani for her old schoolmates. Valeria, repossessing her name, makes a statement about the frailty of the sense of autonomous independence felt by a woman in her time.” Giancarlo Lombardi, *Rooms with a View: Feminist Diary Fiction, 1952–1999* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2002), 32.

²⁸ Zancan, introduction to de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, xviii–xix.

Professor Belluzzi; Emanuela is the “Andori girl’s” mom; Vinca, “Ortiz,” is so named by suor Lorenza after she leaves the boarding house; Anna, in Puglia, is “the Bortone girl,” the landowners’ daughter. Acquiring a last name, consequently, even while it states a character’s civically registered identity, does not attest to the possession of mature individuality, but signals, rather, the difficult collision between the young women’s hopes and the rigidity of social roles.]

However, she ultimately concludes that a character’s acquisition of a *cognome* in the text signals that character’s social status as a complete person, while those who remain without a last name—Augusta, Valentina, Milly—“sono invece i tre personaggi che, per motivi diversi, si fermano sulla soglia della vita [“they are, instead, the three characters who, for different reasons, stop on the threshold of life”] (xix).

Embarking on Matrilineality

Although by no means exhaustive, the representations of “mother” and motherhood explored herein aim to broaden our understanding of the elements involved in any discussion of the “maternal” or “paternal” roles in authority and discursive subjectivity. The relationship between motherhood, fatherhood, and performativity calls attention to the particularly discursive nature of subjectivity. Consideration of the significance of the maternal voice allows us to note the particular quality of “mother”—and by extension, as mother’s necessary counterpart, “father”—as a linguistic category that exists in (uttered) language, by way of (uttered) language, and that generates (uttered) language. Foucault phrases a similar dynamic in terms of discoursing and discursive subjectivity. What emerges as especially striking in exploring the relation between parents, children, and discursive command is the quality of self-reflexivity involved, which highlights the tension in the Foucauldian idea of subjectivity’s duality. Both suor Lorenza and Augusta are “motherly” without a child to call them “mother,” Emanuela is called “mamma” but does not feel herself to be one; despite cultural discourse that would aim to regulate these women discursively according to particular identities, they self-identify in different ways and resist taking on the discursive identities assigned to them by paternal(istic) authority. What is additionally intriguing is the reversal of the traditional interpellative trajectory, presented by Emanuela and Stefania, in which the child becomes the subject of discursive authority who calls “mother” into being. The estrangement between parent and child evident in the interpellated relationships illustrated by the novel invites us to reexamine the novel’s title itself. *Nessuno torna indietro* seems now to attest also to the possibility of a ruptured connection between family members in fascist Italy. Mother and Father become troubled socially constituted identities when no one turns back to heed the call.

In the final section of the novel, Emanuela and her daughter, Stefania, suddenly independently wealthy after the death of Emanuela’s father, embark on a cruise. With Stefania attended to by a governess, Emanuela finds herself in an entirely new community, that of a rootless wealthy leisure class whose time is spent going from cruise to cruise. As one of her new companions remarks, “Dopo tanti viaggi si finisce per non appartenere più a nessun paese, né a quello dal quale partiamo, né a quello al quale arriviamo. In fondo [...] la nostra vera patria è il ponte” [“After so many trips, you end up not belonging to any country anymore, not the one from which we depart, nor the one at which we arrive. In the end, our true homeland is the bridge”] (450). The reference to the ship’s bridge reminds Emanuela of something Silvia said

once, though she is unable to recall what it was. It is, in fact, the central metaphor of the novel that gives the title *Nessuno torna indietro* its significance:

è come se fossimo al passaggio di un ponte. [...] Siamo già partite da una sponda e non siamo ancora giunte all'altra. Quello che abbiamo lasciato è dietro le nostre spalle, neppure ci voltiamo per guardarlo, quello che ci attende è una sponda dietro la nebbia. Neppure noi sappiamo cosa scopriremo quando la nebbia si scioglierà. Qualcuna si sporge a guardare il fiume, cade e affoga. Qualcuna, stanca, si siede per terra e sul ponte s'addormenta. Le altre, quale bene, quale male, passano all'altra riva. (122–23)

[It's as though we're crossing a bridge. [...] We've already left from one side and we haven't yet arrived at the other. What we've left behind us, we don't even turn around to look at, and what awaits us is a side behind the fog. We don't even know what we'll discover when the fog clears. Someone leans over the edge to look at the river, she falls and drowns. Someone, tired, sits down on the ground and she falls asleep on the bridge. The others, for better or worse, cross to the other side.]

Most critics tend to view the final scene of the novel in a wholly positive light as a sign of Emanuela's freedom from the oppressive atmosphere of the Grimaldi and the social stigma of being an unmarried mother.²⁹ Zancan, in fact, identifies the characters with last names as those who have crossed the bridge and arrived at the other side.³⁰ It is certainly true that Emanuela has left the rigid environment of the Grimaldi; however, I think a more attentive reading reveals instead that the novel ends on a note of ambiguity. While the cruise offers the potential for freedom from the rigidity of fascist Italy, it is by no means an entirely free and ungoverned environment of its own. The comment that triggers Emanuela's incomplete memory of Silvia's metaphor is that of the ship's bridge as this group's only *patria*. That this is said while the group plays bridge creates a sort of *mise en abyme* of the *ponte* metaphor and reveals how Emanuela has not necessarily crossed the bridge, but has instead become suspended in what we should think of as a Foucauldian heterotopic space.

Heterotopias are quite similar to Foucauldian disciplinary spaces that aim to produce docile bodies. They are a necessary part of the "set of relations" by which we establish our self-knowledge as individuals and as cultures, and one particular type, the "heterotopia of deviation," operates the same type of spatial and temporal containment carried out by the boarding house.³¹ As a space in which to regulate those "individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm,"³² the most familiar heterotopias of deviation are likely the prison and the mental institution, but a heterotopia does not have to be necessarily punitive. As a space in which to corral that which does not conform, the ship in *Nessuno torna indietro*, populated with an idle, international leisure class that is without any *patria* other than the ship itself, operates as

²⁹ As only one of the most recent examples of this "rosy" perspective, see Chemotti, *L'inchiostro bianco*, 95–96; Chemotti's conclusions are also fully concurred with by Mariangela Tartaglione, *Nel nome della madre: Neera, Sibilla Aleramo, Alba de Céspedes e Anna Banti* (Ariccia: Aracne, 2015), 103.

³⁰ Zancan, introduction to de Céspedes, *Romanzi*, xix.

³¹ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16/1 (Spring 1986): 22–27, 23, 24.

³² Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25. In the context of this study, it is interesting to note that "heterotopias of deviation" developed from what Foucault calls "crisis heterotopias" (24).

a heterotopia of deviation. And the ship, in fact, is for Foucault the “heterotopia *par excellence*”: “a floating piece of space, a place without place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea.”³³ That those on board have chosen the ship for themselves does not change the fact that it still acts as a heterotopic regulatory space structured according to the dominant norms by being a space that contains those who are in opposition to those norms. Although Foucault does not develop this aspect in his own discussion, what is significant about the ship, both with respect to the Foucauldian elaboration of heterotopias, and in particular reference to *Nessuno torna indietro*, is how inherent to the ship as heterotopic space is its own subversion, for the ship will eventually come in to port. The port, by Foucault’s own description, is a “crossroads for dangerous mixtures, a meeting-place for forbidden circulations,” thus ultimately rendering the containment of the ship permeable to uncontrollable elements.³⁴ In the context of de Céspedes’ novel, then, the narrative closes with Emanuela and Stefania, two of the most unruly elements within the text, in the contained space of the ship, but since the itinerary of the cruise is never laid out in full, it is a space that holds the potential for a world of possibilities. In fact, those destinations that are intimated—Africa, China, Japan—constitute the regions that, per fascist rhetoric, represented the greatest demographic threat to Italy and the Italian *stirpe*. Mother and daughter depart, fatherless, and since both Emanuela and Stefania are no longer bound either biologically or economically to the paternal line—Emanuela’s father has died, providing his daughter and granddaughter with a sizeable inheritance, and Stefania, we should remember, does not even have her father’s last name, but her mother’s—the two are also embarking on a financially supported and unfettered matrilineality that could take them beyond the reaches of monologic and monolingual fascist paternal discourse and authority, and into seemingly limitless multilingual discursive and discursing possibility.

³³ Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 27.

³⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 144.