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**Very Queer Friends:
Alba de Céspedes' *Dalla parte di lei* and Elena Ferrante's *La vita bugiarda degli adulti***

Abstract

Elena Ferrante has long acknowledged the influence of Alba de Céspedes' 1949 novel *Dalla parte di lei* on her writing, particularly in terms of conceiving female characters. In Ferrante's newest novel, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, the prominent theme of queer friendship between young women echoes and reconfigures elements from *Dalla parte di lei*. This article delves into the capacious queer relationality depicted in both novels, tracing the presence of transmasculinity and feminist re-writing as key elements in both. Situating the two novels' representations of women's intimacy in their socio-literary contexts, I analyze the ways in which they utilize models like the «fiamma», romantic friendship, sisterhood, and female husbands. Neither author identifies as lesbian or queer; thus my close reading of the frankly sexual and deeply romantic scenes between female characters seeks not to assign the writers or their books to a category, but rather to elaborate the queer dimensions of relationality that they explore. Ultimately, I propose that a significant part of what makes these queer, lesbian, and transmasculine representations possible is a shared feminist project of reading, writing, and rewriting from one's own perspective: *dalla parte di lei*. In this sense, what Ferrante's narrator-protagonist Giovanna owes to de Céspedes' narrator-protagonist Alessandra is not only the possibility of a queer life and a feminist voice, but the potential for narrating queer feminist experience as relational.

Introduction

When Elena Ferrante was sixteen years old, she recounts, she was captivated by Alba de Céspedes' *Dalla parte di lei* (1949); the novel stayed with Ferrante so persistently that in an interview in 2002 she listed it as one of only four books that she continues to read while she is writing (FERRANTE 2016, 77). Ferrante's indebtedness to *Dalla parte di lei*—which she calls «un testo che ormai mi appare tutto di grande intelligenza letteraria»—manifests thematically in her ongoing explorations of the complex, interwoven lives of female characters (FERRANTE 2016, 155). But it also surfaces in more concrete ways: specific images, singular metaphors, the exact shape of a dialogue stretched over silences. In particular, Ferrante's newest novel, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019), shares with *Dalla parte di lei* a striking depiction of a queer friendship between young women that is not only imbued with frank sexuality, but also encompasses nonnormative gender identities. In this article, I trace the dynamics of these two portraits of female intimacy—not merely to argue for Ferrante's debt to de Céspedes,¹ but rather to illuminate the ways in which both writers realize a capacious queer relationality between young women.

Representations of intimacy between women, as Martha Vicinus writes in «The History of Lesbian History», often raise questions of terminology, categorization, and historiography (VICINUS 2012). These concerns reflect a very real desire to recuperate figures that have been occluded through the «ghosting» of lesbian presences, as Terry Castle has noted (CASTLE 1993, 2-6). But if we stop at these questions—who is «really lesbian» or who exactly qualifies as «a woman»—we may be unwittingly returned to the typological impulses of the positivists, or else fall into exclusionary tendencies that have marred queer politics (e.g. TERFs, prejudices against bisexuality, transmisogyny). Instead, as Vicinus proposes, we can ask more productive questions: «When did it become possible to think about, or publicly acknowledge, erotic desire between women? When and how did women themselves articulate this desire?» (VICINUS 2012, 567). If historiographical inquiry privileges the «when», literary analysis is more interested in the «how», the «why», and the intersections between fictional representations and cultural dynamics.

In an Italian socio-literary context, extremely valuable work on lesbian, queer, gay, and transgender histories has been done in the last two decades (e.g. BENADUSI ET AL. 2017, ROSS 2015, BECCALOSSO 2011, SCHETTINI 2011, MILLETTI & PASSERINI 2007, CESTARO 2004, DANNA 2003). In particular, Charlotte Ross has emphasized the importance of analyzing Italian literary representations of female same-sex desires in open-ended and complex ways, rather than «formulating a specific “task” for lesbian cultural representation, since this seems to presume that there is a “right” and a “wrong” way to represent “the lesbian”» (ROSS 2015, 15). Since neither Alba de Céspedes nor Elena Ferrante has publicly identified as lesbian, for example, it is impossible to speak of them as «lesbian writers»; yet both have written vivid, sensual, deeply moving scenes of desire and attachment between women. Moreover, none of the female characters involved in these scenes identifies herself as lesbian, bisexual, queer, homosexual, or trans; at most, they understand themselves as nonnormative, as outside or in excess of restrictive cultural codes. As de Céspedes' protagonist-narrator Alessandra says when she finds a newspaper article that tells a queer transmasculine coming-of-age story that resonates with her, «Non riesco a convincermi di essere una ragazza simile alle altre» (DE CÉSPÉDES 1949, 57).

In both *Dalla parte di lei* and *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, female characters describe their desires, pleasures, affective relations, and intimate friendships in terms like these; not merely «ambiguous» but *more than* or expansively *beyond* a simple, reductive category: this is what I mean by capacious queer relationality. In a figurative sense, it is also this intense but uncategorizable intimacy that binds Elena Ferrante to Alba de Céspedes. Ferrante describes how at sixteen she wept over the words exchanged in a scene between Alessandra and her mother; how she feels the biting grip of that scene still harrowing her now; how the novel has caused her to ask the most searching questions of herself: «Ma come volevo essere?...cerco la via per capire che tipo di donna potevo diventare» (FERRANTE 2016, 157-8). A book that prompts you to ask how you want to be in the world, and what paths are open to you as a woman in that process of becoming, is a powerful thing. If we consider that the person who was asking herself these questions at a young age has now become the contemporary Italian writer most well-known outside of

Italy, and that *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* is likely to have a global readership (especially after its translation into English, scheduled for June 2020) in a time when feminist politics, representations of queerness, and youth culture's embrace of fluid gender & sexual identities are increasingly mainstream, it is an opportune moment to delve into these intertwined scenes of queer intimacy between women.

Narrating the o/a

Dalla parte di lei opens with an expansive framework for gender: the narrator Alessandra explains that she is named for, and regularly possessed by, the spirit of her brother Alessandro, who died before she was born. From the opening page, then, Alessandra understands herself *as also Alessandro*—as someone whose selfhood is already multiply gendered. This «both/and» sense of identity is linked to the complex desires that the young Alessandra feels for her friend Fulvia, who lives upstairs from her. In Alessandra's eyes, Fulvia is alluringly feminine, knowingly sexual, and elusively capricious. As Alessandra struggles to make sense of her own gender and possible place in the world, Fulvia appears sure of herself as a femme maneuvering through a heterosexist culture: at one point she relates casually to that Alessandra's own father has attempted to grope her on the stairs of their apartment building, but that since leering married men disgust her, she ran off (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 47).

In the Prati neighborhood of Rome where Alessandra and Fulvia live, in the context of late-1930s Fascism, models for gender and sexuality are restricted by law as well as by cultural normativity. Even though Fascism never achieved a coherently totalized system for constraining gender and sexuality, as Lucia Re points out, it certainly attempted, in the bluntest and most brutal ways, to institute its racist, homophobic misogyny as the governing principle for both public and private spheres (RE 1995). If in the 1920s there was still some tolerance for feminism or discreet queerness, by 1932 Mussolini's official statement on the status of women stipulated, «La donna deve obbedire... Nel nostro Stato essa non deve contare» (quoted in RE 1995, 78).² In Alessandra's family, as in her neighborhood, women are relegated to a servile status, either domesticated or sexualized. When Alessandra thinks of the married women

around her, she is horrified by men's dual exploitation of women's labor during the day and their sexual availability at night: «Mi sembrava inverosimile che gli stessi uomini, i quali non avevano mai, durante tutto il giorno, una parola d'amore per loro compagne, d'improvviso, la notte, pretendessero di trovarle pronte a quegli amplessi tremendi. Mi pareva di vedere al mattino le donne riprendere il loro lavoro quotidiano portando negli occhi il ricordo di un logorante umiliazione» (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 50). The motivations for intimacy and solidarity with other women are thus numerous and wide-ranging; for Fulvia, Alessandra is enviably intelligent, but also naïve, adoring, humbly in thrall to Fulvia's sensuality. For Alessandra, Fulvia represents a secret, confident knowledge of sexuality, but is also someone whose vulnerability inspires tenderness.

In the middle of Fulvia and Alessandra's relationship is Alessandro. This internal transmasculine presence, Alessandra emphasizes, is one way in which she understands her desire for Fulvia: they are very queer friends. In one scene, Fulvia is lying down on her terrace while Alessandra is seated at her feet. It is summertime, and Fulvia is wearing only a dressing-gown: «la sua vestaglia s'apriva sulle spalle, sul seno, sulle gambe, che io contemplavo con avida curiosità», Alessandra recounts longingly (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 48). The visual pleasure of Fulvia's body for Alessandra is part of the rhythm of the narration, and the «avidia curiosità» is neither reduced to a mirroring (i.e. Alessandra using Fulvia to understand herself) nor to a possessive, nonconsensual sexuality (i.e. Alessandra replicating the behavior of men who leer at Fulvia). Rather, Fulvia lets her dressing-gown fall open so that Alessandra can see her body, and Alessandra, in turn, appreciates and enjoys Fulvia's choice to reveal her body, to trust the space of their intimacy in the drowsy heat of the terrace. When Fulvia demands impetuously that Alessandra fan her, Alessandra complies willingly, explaining, «Sentivo che Alessandro era innamorato di lei e voglioso di consumarla con gli occhi... Godevo nel guardarla» (ibid.). In this passage, Alessandra expresses herself—the narrative «I»—as also Alessandro, narrating the o/a as one desiring subjectivity.

In this section, it is noteworthy that de Céspedes utilizes gendered adjectives—Alessandro is «innamorato» and «voglioso» while Alessandra is «ingenua»—to communicate the simultaneous layers of identities present in

Alessandra's desire for Fulvia. Since it is only very recently that Italian activists have begun to find linguistic strategies to express non-binary gender,³ this is a striking attempt by a writer in 1949 to honor the complexities of what we might now call transmasculine, masc-of-center, or non-binary identity. This scene illustrates a thought-provoking point made by the queer linguistics scholar Anna Livia: that in some cases, «grammaticalized gender... also provides linguistic devices to express gender fluidity» (LIVIA 1997, 365). Desiring Fulvia might be thought of as a collaborative project between Alessandra and Alessandro, one which includes and commingles their perspectives. Although there have been some readings of this novel that cast Alessandro as a negative force, even one that reifies the misogynist hierarchy of Alessandra's time and place (TORRIGLIA 2002, 51), or manifests an internalized homophobia that «reinforces the ideological imperative that desire should proceed in a linear fashion from man to woman» (ANATRONE 2015, 26), this scene demonstrates that the confluence of Alessandro and Alessandra is not simply a relation of blame, anxiety, or female submission. In fact, directly after representing Alessandro's amorous gaze, Alessandra uses the narrative «I» to state, «Godevo nel guardarla»; she may be «ingenua» in practical terms, but she is just as capable of scopic sexual desire as he is. The feelings Alessandro and Alessandra share for Fulvia are heightened by the fluid movement of narration between their subjectivities.

In quick succession, the following pages of *Dalla parte di lei* bring a series of reflections on the normative sexual roles of men and women: Fulvia explains to Alessandra that she is sleeping with Dario, even though she does not love him, because she feels worthless (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 49); a boy tries to kiss Alessandra, provoking her intense disgust (50-1); and the maid in Alessandra's household tells her baldly, when asked about love, «Gli uomini sono porchi» (ibid. 52). What follows these reflections is another scene on Fulvia's terrace, this time with a circle of other girls. In the midst of their conversation, Fulvia senses her social power being challenged, and responds by slipping off her dressing-gown, demanding that her companions admire her naked body. Alessandra, overwhelmed, tries to leave, but Fulvia—«ancora nuda, ma aveva stretto a sé la vestaglia»—catches her at the doorway and pins her to the wall, asking Alessandra if she feels contempt, while kissing her and caressing her face

(ibid. 56). This storm of contradictory words and actions attests to the affective intensity of their relationship.

Afterwards, Alessandra is left in turmoil: a confusion of guilt for having fled Fulvia's nudity, a desire to be pardoned for her apparent rejection of Fulvia's embraces, and a profound longing to be with Fulvia again. Above all, Alessandra longs to reveal the presence of Alessandro to Fulvia, but fears that part of her that is Alessandro might be abnormal and shameful, a kind of bodily «defect» she has had since birth (ibid. 57). The lexicon, the emotional charge, and the conflict between an inner sense of gender and restrictive cultural normativity in this passage are familiar to us as elements of coming-out narratives. In a key moment, Alessandra finds a story in a newspaper «di una ragazza che, presso ai vent'anni, scopre d'essere uomo»; she cuts out the article and hides it in a book, desperate for any scrap of recognition, kinship, or assurance about her own transmasculinity (ibid. 57).⁴ As in the interwoven descriptions of Alessandro and Alessandra's perspectives on Fulvia *en déshabillé*, here there is an intermingling of genders that does not invalidate either one: the article is about a girl who, at twenty, «discovered to be a man», in a literal (if awkward) translation—or we might say, «found that he was a man». The shift from the *-a* of «ragazza» to the *-o* of «uomo» is narrated simply as a transition from one gendered state to another, without making recourse to harmful tropes about trans bodies.

Between friends

Embracing, kissing, and caressing, along with intimate conversation and nudity, form part of the romantic and erotic friendship between the young Alessandra and Fulvia. As Lillian Faderman and other lesbian historiographers have pointed out, terms like «romantic friendship» waned over the course of the twentieth century (FADERMAN 2011). But this ambiguous category is useful in the case of Alessandra and Fulvia, whose relationship is *both* emotional and sexual. Unlike some of Faderman's subjects in the US, moreover, these two characters do not have access to models of lesbians per se; as ethnographic research by Elena Biagini (2007) demonstrates, women who desired women in Fascist Italy often used oblique phrases like Alessandra's

«Non riuscivo a convincermi di essere una ragazza simile alle altre». In addition, both Fulvia and Alessandra eventually also have sexual relations with men, complicating any attempt to assign them a definitive identity. Their intense, expansive queer friendship thus shares some elements with the «fiamma» phenomenon that Ross observes in late 19th-century Italy; this attachment between young women who were living in close proximity to each other (in boarding schools, for example), could include «nights spent together», «lingering kisses», and «professions of tender feeling» (ROSS 2015, 89). In the Fascist 1920s, Ross notes, girls and women were explicitly cautioned by state propaganda against ambiguously close friendships with other women (ibid. 192), indicating that the «fiamma» was still seen as a threat to heteronormative order at that time.

In fact, Alba de Céspedes' first novel, published in 1938, was set in an women's boarding-house in Rome—and was banned by Fascist censors. Titled *Nessuno torna indietro*, the book features characters like Silvia, depicted as an intellectual who rejects traditional femininity and figures of heterosexual seduction, as well as Augusta, who is writing a novel that is not only feminist, but appears to verge on lesbian separatism.⁵ A third character, Vinca, openly discusses her experiences as a young girl who adored a female classmate to the point of etching the beloved's name into the skin of her own arm; and a fourth, Valentina, is drawn so thoroughly into a friendship with Augusta that they seem not only coupled, but virtually merged into one. *Dalla parte di lei* explores many of the questions raised by *Nessuno torna indietro*: what women would say to each other in shared private spaces about their sexual desires and histories; how women's intimacies sometimes develop under the cover of ambiguous states such as the crush, the flame, the house-mate, or the romantic friendship; and how reading and writing contribute to an awareness of one's own gender and sexuality.

The scenes of erotic and romantic attachment between Fulvia and Alessandra are not limited to their youth, however. In the later part of *Dalla parte di lei*, when Alessandra is married to a man named Francesco, they share another series of encounters. If Fulvia arrives at Alessandra's house while Francesco is present, the two women often lock themselves into the bathroom together so that they can talk privately, recalling the days of their youth when

they shared cramped spaces in each other's houses (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 287); when Francesco is away, they lay down together on Alessandra's bed, and Fulvia again disrobes (ibid. 289). Watching with pleasure as Fulvia takes off her dress, Alessandra «le guardavo il seno, tondo, bianco. Che dolce cosa, pensavo, un seno femminile» (ibid. 289). This repetition of a scene of Alessandra's pleasure in Fulvia undressing emphasizes that their relationship is not merely a «fiamma», a frivolous flickering crush of their youth. Moreover, the adult Alessandra is no longer «ingenua»; she is now able to fully enjoy seeing Fulvia's body, and to comment affirmatively on her own pleasure.

Then Fulvia, watching as Alessandra disrobes, compliments her in a singular way that acknowledges Alessandra's non-binary gender: «Come sei graziosa!» Fulvia exclaims, «Sei come un giunco...Guinco. Una parola mezzo uomo e mezza donna» (ibid. 289). As they continue lying on the bed together, talking, Fulvia introduces the revelation that a man they know—in fact, the object of Alessandra's mother's romantic adoration—is gay (ibid. 290). As soon as homosexuality is articulated as a possible form of romantic love, Fulvia confesses that, as a girl, she was in love with Alessandra, and within half a page they are praising the love of women, discussing the alluring idea that they might have married each other, and contemplating the possibility of never leaving Alessandra's bedroom again (ibid. 292). Before the end of the scene, Alessandra thinks bitterly that she could show her husband Francesco what it *should* be like to love a woman; this creates a complex identification in which Alessandra positions herself simultaneously as Fulvia's husband and as the beloved of a woman like herself, attentive and adoring—a woman whose masculinity serves to cherish her partner.

The mutuality and felicity of Fulvia and Alessandra's relationship is heightened by Alessandra's misery in marriage and Fulvia's unhappy entanglements with Dario, who continues to sleep with her without any promise of marriage. Even as Fulvia and Alessandra are involved with other men, and even as they seek to convince themselves that these men are worth loving, the model of female intimacy persists as a kind of ideal. While fondly observing Fulvia's hair strewn across Francesco's pillow, for example, Alessandra is struck by the realization that *none* of the men they have dated, slept with, or married, is capable of truly loving them: «Oh, pensavo, che cosa meravigliosa è una

donna, perché nessuno sa vederla, nessuno amarla compiutamente?» (ibid. 291). The juxtaposition of Fulvia's head on Francesco's pillow, while Alessandra thinks of herself as Fulvia's rightful husband, is emphasized by the male pronoun «nessuno», intended to stand for a general or «neutral» category. But this is precisely Alessandra's point: why it is that no [male] person knows how to see a woman, no [male] person knows how to fully love her? The answer is implied by the gendered forms of the questions: because Alessandra herself would ideally become that person, that *o/a* who comprehends the marvel of a woman.

In bed with Francesco, Dario, & Tonino

After Alessandra and Fulvia spend the afternoon lying in bed together, reflecting on their erotic and romantic relationships, Alessandra asks Fulvia on a date for that evening. Alessandra's nervous insistence is touching: she murmurs the imperative to Fulvia, «Torna, stasera», proposing that they go to the cinema and then spend the night together at Alessandra's house (ibid. 292). Arriving «puntualissima» at the cinema, buying the most expensive tickets, presenting Fulvia with a box of chocolates: Alessandra seems bent on demonstrating that she knows how to treat a woman with care and respect. Moreover, De Céspedes is careful to note, during their date they do not speak of Dario or Francesco. When they return to Alessandra's house, Alessandra takes Fulvia out on the moonlit terrace, then offers her the dressing-gown that Alessandra herself wore on her wedding-night with Francesco, continuing the effort to reconfigure the positions of husband and female beloved in anti-heteronormative ways (ibid. 293). As they undress, and Alessandra again enjoys contemplating Fulvia naked, she also begins to figure Fulvia's body as emblematic: for a moment, it stands for all of the injustices and indignities visited upon women's bodies, most strikingly the «sopruso delle nozze» (ibid. 294). If some of the physical suffering of women that Alessandra elaborates in this list might be seen as either natural (e.g. adolescence, old age) or chosen (e.g. the decision to give birth or breast-feed a child), the characterization of a wedding-night as oppression or tyranny stands out as shocking, arbitrary violence.

In fact, Alessandra's own experience of her wedding-night is one of brutal disappointment. In contrast to the kisses, caresses, tender words, and loving gaze that she had expected from her new husband, Francesco is silent, «severo, tutto gesti frettolosi»; sex is hasty and unpleasant; afterwards, Alessandra is paralyzed by the brusqueness and banality of it all, «il sangue ghiacciato dentro di me» (ibid. 250-1). The only thing that seems to her a spark of hope are the flowers that Francesco has given her; she says openly to him, «i tuoi fiori mi hanno parlato durante tutto il giorno: anche adesso parlano e sono un grande conforto. Volevo dirti grazie: sono molto importanti, per me, i pensieri d'amore» (251). The flowers, of course, are from Fulvia, who has secretly told Francesco to buy gardenias for Alessandra, because *Fulvia* knows full well that expressions of love are extremely important to her friend. Thus when Alessandra re-enacts the scene of a wedding-night with Fulvia, this time with romantic gestures of such earnestness that they seem almost pitiable, it is both a rewriting of her own trauma and a latent expression of gratitude for the gesture of love that Fulvia had routed through Francesco. Fulvia-as-Francesco thinks to buy Alessandra a bouquet of gardenias for her honeymoon, and thus Alessandra-as-Francesco offers Fulvia the romantic wedding-night—complete with moonlit terrace, chocolates, and nuptial dressing-gown—that Fulvia has never had.

At the end of the evening, Fulvia and Alessandra stand before the mirror and look at themselves together, a refraction of the selves they have been and are now reimagining for each other. In their white dressing-gowns, with the white expanse of the bed hovering behind them in the dim room, Alessandra comments, «sembravamo due sorelle giovani che abitano la stessa camera e insieme aspettino l'avvenire e i sogni» (ibid. 294). This characterization of the two as sisters (itself a trope about lesbians) is followed by an oblique allusion to the man Fulvia has earlier revealed as gay; then Alessandra and Fulvia fall into bed together: «Dicevamo Dario, Francesco. Tutto la notte dormimmo abbracciate» (ibid. 295). Having avoided any mention of Dario or Francesco for the entire evening—Alessandra even chases away a stray memory of Francesco brought on by the scent of geraniums in their house—Fulvia and Alessandra now re-appropriate their names in a queer transmasculine way for their own erotic pleasure.

In Elena Ferrante's *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, there are actual sisters—Angela and Ida—who are involved in a complicated queer friendship with the narrator-protagonist, Giovanna. When the sisters are first introduced as characters, Giovanna calls them «mie amiche fidate», and describes the qualities they all share: they are similarly feminist («tutt'è tre sapevamo che bisognava sentirsi orgogliose di essere nate femmine»), and similarly fervent readers («tutt'è tre leggevamo moltissimo») (FERRANTE 2019, 22). In addition to appreciating their political and intellectual companionship, Giovanna is drawn to both sisters physically: «Erano ben proporzionate, cesellate con tale cura che solo a vederle sentivo la necessità del loro calore e le abbracciavo e baciavo come se volessi fonderle a me» (ibid. 23). In fact, readers will discover a few pages later, Angela and Giovanna are sexually involved; Giovanna describes «una memoria gradevolissima di giochi con Angela» in which they intertwine their legs, place a doll between their underwear, «quindi ci strusciavamo, ci torcevamo senza disagio, premendo forte tra di noi la pupazza che sembrava vivissima e felice» (ibid. 28). The mutual masturbation of Giovanna and Angela, for the most part depicted as pleasurable, happy, and free from shame, is contrasted against the deceptive and destructive heterosexuality of their parents. Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Giovanna's father has been carrying on a long-standing affair with Angela and Ida's mother; but this revelation is triggered only when Giovanna glimpses Angela and Ida's father feeling up her own mother under the table at a dinner party. As the unhappy bourgeois heterosexual families split up in the wake of this adulterous duplicity, Angela and Giovanna remain sexually and emotionally involved, providing each other a queer sustenance of affection, trust, and pleasure.

On the evening when Giovanna catches sight of her mother's ankle between the legs of Ida and Angela's father, Giovanna spends the night in the sisters' room. More specifically, Ida—the younger sister—insists that she, too, wants to sleep in Angela's bed with both of them (ibid. 93). The three of them thus cuddle into Angela's bed together, but when it appears that Ida has dropped off to sleep, Angela and Giovanna sneak into Ida's empty bed so that they can continue their whispered secrets and embraces. Angela wants to know more about a boy that Giovanna has recently met named Tonino; as they discuss

Tonino and caress each other, Ferrante crafts a scene that echoes and reconfigures de Céspedes' portrayal of Fulvia and Alessandra:

Mi abbracciò stretta e io abbracciai lei come facevamo quando dormivamo insieme. Ce ne stemmo così, sforzandoci di aderire il più possibile l'una all'altra, io con le braccia intorno al suo collo, lei intorno ai miei fianchi. Mi arrivò piano un odore suo che conoscevo bene, era intenso e insieme dolce, dava tepore. Mi stringi troppo, mormorai, e lei, soffocando una risatella contro il mio petto, mi chiamò Tonino. Sospirai, dissi: Angela. Lei ripeté, questa volta senza ridere: Tonino, Tonino, Tonino, e aggiunse: giurami che me lo farai conoscere, se non non siamo più amiche. Glielo giurai e ci bacciammo con baci lunghissimi, accarezzandoci. Pur avendo sonno, non riuscivamo a smettere. Era un piacere sereno, cacciava via l'angoscia, e perciò ci pareva una rinuncia senza ragione (ibid. 95).

Ferrante's description of their close embrace while sleeping is almost the same as that of de Céspedes, but the sweet yet intense scent that Giovanna identifies with Angela is more subtle, evoking the gardenias that Fulvia arranges for Alessandra to receive on her wedding-night. In direct contrast to the brusque, hasty gestures of a man like Francesco (whose emblem in the novel becomes the way he turns his back to Alessandra like a wall when they are in bed together), the female couples in both novels take pleasure in tight embraces, long kisses, and tender caresses. But the most striking element in both scenes is the use of male names as part of women's sexual repertoire; the re-appropriation of masculinity from the men who have failed to embody it properly, in both cases, allows for its recirculation between women in queer transmasculine ways. If Alessandra can take the place of Dario, and Fulvia can take the place of Francesco—and, in more complex ways, Alessandra can substitute herself for Francesco—then it makes sense that Angela calls Giovanna by the name Tonino. It is, as Giovanna concludes, such a tranquil pleasure that there is no reason to stop.

Sisters and writers

The adults whose lives are lies, in *La vita bugiarda degli adulti*, are the parents of Giovanna, Angela, and Ida, whose bourgeois manners and moralizing

lectures have temporarily masked the truth of their adulterous affairs from their daughters. But as the families splinter and then reconfigure, Giovanna becomes the *de facto* sister of Angela and Ida, as her father now lives with their mother in a villa in the elegant Posillipo neighborhood of Napoli. In a further twist, Tonino becomes the boyfriend of Angela; every time Angela says Tonino's name, therefore, she is also invoking her amorous history with Giovanna. When the three young women now gather, they are bound together by sisterhood, by direct sexual involvement, and by a queer routing of sexuality through the male figure of Tonino. The three also agree secretly to renounce all of their parents, an idea that comes to them from books they've read; when Angela and Giovanna, excited by their own daring, proclaim that they will piss on photographs of their fathers, only Ida demurs, saying that she will watch them and write about the scene instead (ibid. 155). Not only are they now sisters, in other words, but they also continually draw closer together by rejecting their parents—especially the model of their parents' heterosexuality—and by designating objects of desire that they can share and exchange.

This is not to say that the three young women cease to be involved with men; on the contrary, in the course of their conversation about renouncing their parents, Giovanna declares that she regularly debases herself sexually with boys. She has only briefly described her sordid encounters when Ida interrupts her, «Che schifo». Giovanna agrees immediately with Ida, «tutto fa un po' schifo», and when Angela asks her what she means by «tutto», Giovanna clarifies: «I maschi, sembra di stare nel cesso di un treno» (ibid. 156). It is clear in this scene that, to varying degrees, the three of them agree that heterosexuality, insofar as they have witnessed and experienced it, is a repulsive prospect. Even though Ida is more hesitant to defile the images of her parents, and even though Angela protests that Tonino is more respectful than Giovanna's general description of «i maschi», all three value the intimacy that they share as friends, sisters, sexual partners, and political allies over any other heteronormative arrangement in their lives. It is worth noting, too, that reading and writing play a central role in their collective search for alternate models of relationality. When they seek a mode of symbolically disowning their parents, it is a book that suggests the proper action to them; when Ida finds that act too

difficult to embody, she proposes instead that she will process the situation by writing about it.

In *Dalla parte di lei*, the young Alessandra sees the sexual dominion of men over their wives as «un logorante umiliazione»; by the end of the book, the more experienced Alessandra reflects that being a married woman is like being a slave or a workhorse, but worse: husbands have the legal right to dispose of your body in any way they please, not only to beat you but also to imprison and dishonor you (DE CÉSPÉDES 1949, 378). «L'unico modo in cui potevo disporre del mio corpo era di gettarlo nel fiume», Alessandra concludes bitterly, alluding to the suicide of her mother in the Tevere (itself a repetition of the drowning of the infant Alessandro, and thus doubly present in Alessandra's consciousness). Alessandra and Giovanna share this strategy of self-abnegation—the sense that the only «liberty» in a patriarchal economy, the only movement possible for a woman navigating laws and norms made by men—is to debase or annihilate yourself. The language of possession and disposal of female bodies—normalized in legal frameworks that, for example, did not allow divorce in Italy until 1970—is heightened by women narrating their own desperate attempts to act within that system.

In the end, it is Ida who develops a model that incorporates Giovanna's sexual debasement but finds a way to move beyond it. Angela has gone abroad, leaving Ida and Giovanna to cope with their fathers' machinations and their mothers' pretenses (e.g. Giovanna's mother, who has always insisted on her innocence in the adulterous scenario, walks out of her bedroom one day with Ida and Angela's father). In this period Ida has been mirroring Giovanna scholastically and sexually: first Giovanna is held back a grade, then Ida defiantly fails her year; first Giovanna describes her abject sexual encounters with random men, then Ida «per essere indegna il più possibile aveva vinto lo schifo e si era incontrata con un tale che per un certo periodo aveva fatto lavori nel giardino delle case di Posillipo, sposato, con tre figli», describing her experience as «bruttissimo. Aveva una saliva che pareva acqua di fogna» (FERRANTE 2019, 313). This is a «sisterhood» of solidarity, even though it involves subjecting themselves to failure and disgust; in fact, as Ida emphasizes, it is precisely in order to be as shameful as possible to their parents that they undertake these projects of defilement. In the process, Ida and Giovanna

reframe heterosexual sex as sordid, marriage as a sham, and men as sewers. But Ida also envisions a future beyond this state, and she helps Giovanna to see its possibilities as well.

Although it is Giovanna who begins the novel by identifying herself as the narrator and author of the story, it is eventually Ida who emerges as the figure of the writer within the novel. Giovanna's self-conception as a writer is one of inadequacy and ignorance; she denigrates her own ability: «dentro queste righe che vogliono darmi una storia mentre in effetti non sono niente... solo un garbuglio che nessuno, nemmeno chi in questo momento sta scrivendo, sa se contiene il filo giusto di un racconto» (ibid. 9). There is a sly metaliterary gesture here on Ferrante's part, since the «chi in questo momento sta scrivendo» is both Giovanna and Elena Ferrante: both are fictional inventions of other writers. Moreover, the deliberate marking of the novel as a story told by its narrator, who seeks through writing to understand her complicated story, hints at the structure of *Dalla parte di lei*, narrated retrospectively by Alessandra from a prison cell as she seeks to justify and explain how her life as a woman has led her to shoot her husband while he lies in bed, turning the wall of his back to her for the thousandth time, after he has just forced her to have non-consensual sex.

Alessandra's violently radical feminism—Francesco Ghera's article on this theme is titled «Alessandra Spara al Patriarcato» (2015)—may seem a surprising choice for a woman like Alba de Céspedes, who was at the time of the novel's publication seemingly content to be married to a man. But de Céspedes explained in a diary entry in August 1952 that Alessandra is the result of her own revelatory experience as a woman in the antifascist struggle: «Poi sono cambiata io, radicalmente, attraverso il passaggio delle linee, Bari, Mercurio, l'accostamento a nuovi problemi, e un mio nuovo e più profondo mondo intimo. Alessandra esprime questo mutamento, e, in parte, questo mondo...» (*Alba de Céspedes* 2001, 44). Alessandra, who also collaborates with the *partigiani*, is a rewriting of Alba de Céspedes arrival at a new awareness of structural inequities, horrific violence, and her own capacity as a woman and a writer to contribute to a more just world. In fact, this state—being a woman who uses writing both to understand herself and to express a shockingly frank perspective on what it is like to be a woman in Italy—is one that Alba de

Céspedes shares with Elena Ferrante, just as Alessandra shares it with Giovanna and Ida.

Alessandra is identified early in *Dalla parte di lei* as a voracious reader of novels, like her mother; her father, by contrast, disdains books (and the women who read them) as a waste of time (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 44). It is left to the women who read and write to recuperate the value of literary strategies such as self-narration, lived experiences reimagined as fiction, and writing as a liberatory strategy. When Ida and Giovanna meet in the gardens of the Villa Floridiana to discuss their possible actions, now that Angela is gone, Ida first narrates her «bruttissimo» sexual encounter, and then declares, «Vorrei andare in un posto dove sto bene e scrivo» (FERRANTE 2019, 313). This line, confided by Ida to Giovanna, seems to me to be the key to the end of the novel. It is such a simple utterance: one writer says to another writer, in a spirit of sisterhood, that she just wants to go to a place where she can be well and write.

Perversely, Alessandra concludes her narration in *Dalla parte di lei* by stating that, for her, the prison cell is that place. The final page of the novel, which explains the title, also conveys the tragic sense that it is only in the severe, silent constraint of a prison cell that Alessandra can find peace (DE CÉSPEDES 1949, 405). «Ho voluto narrare la cronaca esatta di questo tragico avvenimento poiché mi sembra giusto che esso sia visto anche dalla parte di chi lo ha vissuto essendone protagonista», Alessandra states: thus, *dalla parte di lei*. The cell where Alessandra can be well and write, furthermore, reminds her of her childhood home, where she lived downstairs from Fulvia, in a time when Alessandra's mother was still alive and reading novels. The window of the austere prison cell gives out over a courtyard, reminding her of the courtyard of her youth, which faced a convent—a place where only women live together, like the boarding-house of *Nessuno torna indietro*. «Nella severa pace di questo luogo», Alessandra writes, referring to the prison but evoking the image of the convent, «mi è stato agevole riandare la mia storia; e, scriverla, addirittura un sollievo» (ibid. 405).

«Riandare la mia storia», for Alessandra, is an essential part of the consolation of writing; in other words, her narration is both a writing and a rewriting, both «andare in un posto» (in Ida's words) and «riandare» to the site of the story. Alessandra, who over the course of the novel has gradually felt

Alessandro diminish in her, ends by rewriting masculine presence in a different way. Although she is quite clear-eyed and sharp in her assessment of the fact that women in her position will always be judged—and therefore condemned—by men who have no understanding of the brutality of quotidian patriarchal oppression, Alessandra is given to imagining that the spirit of the dead Francesco comes to visit her every evening in her prison cell. But this Francesco, Alessandra is quick to clarify, has none of the attributes or traits of the actual Francesco. Instead, this Francesco is attentive, tender, eager to be close to her, held rapt by their conversations, enamored of her intelligence: «Egli è ora, insomma, come io avevo sempre sognato che fosse» (ibid. 405). In short, this Francesco is very much like Fulvia.

If Alessandra can only find resolution to the trauma of patriarchy in solitude, enclosure, imagination, and rewriting, Giovanna and Ida offer a more positive and daring potential. Once Ida has articulated what she actually desires—«Vorrei andare in un posto dove sto bene e scrivo»—she wants to read one of her stories aloud to Giovanna. Sitting together on a bench in the shade, Giovanna and Ida return through Ida's story to the scene of the sleepover in Angela and Ida's room. Ida's story retells the evening from her own perspective—that is, *dalla parte di lei*—and thus reveals that she was not sleeping while Angela and Giovanna kissed and embraced, but rather observing them and longing for that kind of love. In fact, at the end of this story of the younger sister's wistful envy, Ida concludes, «Da allora non aveva più smesso con quella finzione per poterle spiare, e sempre, quando finalmente le due grandi si addormentavano, piangeva un po', perché le pareva che nessuno le volesse bene» (FERRANTE 2019, 314). Then Ida bursts into tears, mirroring the end of her own story.

Ida's courage in telling her own story back to Giovanna opens *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* to a queer ending. Giovanna listens to Ida's story as a kind of witnessing: Giovanna is recognizing Ida as a writer *worth* listening to, and at the same time, acknowledging that Ida too desires the very queer friendship—erotic, romantic, affective, intimate, and later sisterly—that Angela and Giovanna have shared since the beginning of the book. Ida's act of rewriting, and even re-enacting, a scene of queerness that she yearns to join, means that Giovanna now has the opportunity to console her. Giovanna dries Ida's tears

with her handkerchief and then kisses her, risking the shocked disapproval of two mothers passing by with their baby carriages. This lesbian kiss in public is more than another attempt to outrage bourgeois heterosexuality; it is a recognition that readers, writers, and rewriters are intertwined, affecting each other in queer ways. Giovanna is Ida's audience in this scene, but she is also Ida's narrator in the novel; Ida is the rewriter of Giovanna and Angela's embraces from her own perspective, but she is also a mirror of Giovanna's self-abasement. The novel ends with a hopeful, open-ended queer voyage away from the deceptions and disappointments of heteronormativity: Ida and Giovanna leave the city together, and in the final line of the book, Giovanna concludes, «In treno ci riprometteremo di diventare adulte come a nessuna era mai successo» (ibid. 326).

This proclamation is tempered only by one thing: the fact that there *has* been a female character before them who, at least in some ways, became an adult like no one before her in Italian literature.⁶ It is no accident that Giovanna describes her affinity with Ida and Angela as literary—«tutt'e tre leggevamo moltissimo»—and that Ida and Giovanna's liberation is tied to Ida's ability to rewrite stories from her own perspective, opening up previous exclusions for reparative queer work. Just as de Céspedes characterizes Alessandra as an avid reader like her mother, these genealogies of women who read and write for each other are a vital form of sustenance in a heteronormative, heavily patriarchal world. De Céspedes writes Alessandra as both an act of intimate self-expression and a public, political statement; Alessandra gives much the same explanation of her own narrative impulse at the end of *Dalla parte di lei*. And Elena Ferrante, who says that she felt prompted by de Céspedes' novel to interrogate how she wanted to be in the world, and what paths were open to her as a woman in that process of becoming, makes *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* an homage to and a rewriting of *Dalla parte di lei*; they are sisters, albeit in a very queer way.

Notes

¹ The link between these two books has been mentioned already, for example, by Laura Fortini's review in *Il Manifesto*: «La baldanza della giovinezza della personaggio protagonista del famoso romanzo di Aleramo è infatti parte fondante della genealogia letteraria dell'indagine di Ferrante, che interloquisce anche con l'Alessandra tumultuosa protagonista di *Dalla parte di lei* di Alba de Céspedes, alla cui adolescenza sono dedicate pagine significative» (FORTINI 2019).

² This is not to say that lesbian «r/esistenze» were not also present under and even within Fascism; for example, see BIAGINI 2007 and GUAZZO 2010.

³ The first time that I (as a cis woman) heard phrases such as «Ciao a tutti, tutte, e tutt*» pronounced publicly was at the 2019 Assemblée Nazionale, in Napoli, of Non Una di Meno, a transfeminist group founded four years ago. Michela Baldo traces the choice to pronounce «tutt*» as «tuttu» to grassroots transfeminist groups, most prominently the *Laboratoria Transfemminista, Transpecie Terrona Napoli*, which links the struggle for gender and sexual rights to the fight for the equality of the Mezzogiorno (BALDO 2017). It is indicative that as late as 2016, two Napoli-based queer studies scholars were still writing of the pronunciation of «*» as «un “problema” di non poco conto: non è traslabile nel parlato, forzando dunque il parlante (di fronte all'ambiguità) a scegliere necessariamente un genere nel momento dell'enunciazione orale» (MAROTTA & MONACO 2016, 50).

⁴ Francesco Ghera articulates the queer and trans dimensions of this scene in different terms, characterizing Alessandra as someone whose essentialist view of gender causes her to view her young self as «un “maschio mancato”» when she is in fact possesses traits that are «androgine e omosessuali»; he ultimately calls her «una prospettiva queer ante litteram» (GHERA 2015, 674-5).

⁵ For fuller discussions of these characters, see: ROSS 2015, 257-263; GALLUCCI 1995, 207-10; CARLETTI 2000; and the edited volume ZANCAN 2011.

⁶ For a comparative analysis of women's violence against men in *Dalla parte di lei* and Natalia Ginzburg's *È stato così*, see CARLETTI 1996.

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