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Comparability and Translatability in the making of Historical Narratives: Alba de Céspedes's Comparative Method¹

Abstract

This article examines the comparative method used by Italian writer Alba de Céspedes in relation to questions of comparability, translatability, and in connection to the role of censorship in the production of historical narratives. It draws on two case studies: an article written for the magazine *Epoca* in 1959, and a series of poems portraying the Parisian May 1968, and it examines the history of translation of these poems in the Italian and Cuban context. Two types of comparisons emerge from the analysis of these texts: 'vertical comparisons', that is, comparisons that establish a relation between events positioned at different historical times, and 'horizontal comparisons', which connect contemporary, geographically distant events. While horizontal comparisons are necessarily transnational, vertical comparison can involve *comparanda* based within or beyond the nation. In de Céspedes' works, transnational comparisons issue a desire for translation, but at the same time prevent the translation from taking place, due, in part, to the contentious relationship between comparison and censorship evoked by the text in the target context. In fact, it is precisely the hyper-comparability of the poems themselves that limits their circulation in translation. In turn, untranslatability makes such texts significant for the comparatist precisely because it prompts a reflection on the socio-political factors that limit comparability.

Keywords:

Alba de Céspedes; comparability; translatability; censorship; Cuba; 1968

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On November 9, 2022, an event titled 'Holocaust, Nakba und deutsche Erinnerungskultur' (The Holocaust, the Nakba and German cultural memory) was scheduled to take place in Tel Aviv.² Organised by the Goethe Institute and the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, it featured a conversation between German journalist Charlotte Wiedemann and Israeli academics Amos Goldberg and Bashir Bashir, all authors of books on the subject. Goldberg and Bashir's recent edited collection uncovers how, in dominant discourses in both the Jewish and the Palestinian contexts, the Holocaust and the Nakba are seen as unique events, which leads to the suffering

of the other group being devalued; Wiedemann's recent book calls for empathy, in the Kantian sense of intellectual act, among Israelis and Palestinians.³

The date chosen for the debate was a symbolic one, the anniversary of the pogroms that took place in Berlin in the night of November 9, 1938, and was interpreted by some politicians as a provocation. The Israeli foreign minister declared himself shocked about 'den zynischen und manipulativen Versuch, eine Verbindung herzustellen, deren einziger Zweck ist, Israel zu diffamieren' ('the cynical and manipulative attempt to establish a connection the sole purpose of which is to defame Israel').⁴ The Israeli ambassador in Germany, Ron Proso, wrote on Twitter that holding the proposed debate on the anniversary of the Kristallnacht meant degrading the memory of the Holocaust, and demanded first that the event be postponed, then cancelled. Dani Dayan, the chairman of the Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, described the intention to discuss the memory of the Holocaust in conjunction with the Nakba as 'inakzeptabel und respektlos' ('unacceptable and disrespectful'). The main issue, in Dayan's opinion, was the comparison implicit in the debate: 'Die Flucht und Vertreibung von Hunderttausend Palästinensern 1948 ist natürlich nicht gleichzusetzen mit der industriellen Massenvernichtung von Juden in Nationalsozialismus' ('the flight and expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948 cannot obviously be equated with the industrial mass extermination of Jews under Nazism').⁵ When the debate finally took place at the Einstein Forum in Postdam, Germany, on February 2, 2023, the moderator, Susan Neiman, began by commenting on the paradoxical role of censorship ('censoring material only makes it more exciting')⁶ and, to defend Goldberg and Bashir, felt obliged to stress that their work does not equate the Holocaust and the Nakba; it rather explores 'the possibility of creating a shared language for discussion, the memories of two entangled, but entirely different historical events.'⁷

What happened in Tel Aviv reminds us that comparing is far from a politically neutral act, and also prompts us to reflect on the way in which censorship is still used today to maintain control over historical narratives by specific social groups. Etymologically, to compare comes from the Latin *comparare*, a verb formed by the prefix *cum*, meaning ‘together, together with, in combination’ and *par*, which means ‘equal’.⁸ To compare, we are reminded by the etymology, means to bring together two (or more) terms on even ground. While one can certainly compare to emphasise differences, the possibility of comparison presupposes a shared condition, which in the case of the debate scheduled in Tel Aviv was ruled out officially by the sense of incommensurability that surrounds the Holocaust, and less officially by the political agenda of right-wing Israeli politicians.

As Catherine Brown has argued, comparisons underpin not only critical, but also artistic endeavours: fictional writers, just like scholars and journalists, use comparisons to structure their works.⁹ My focus in this article will be on the comparative method used by Alba de Céspedes in non-fictional and fictional texts, and on the implications that working with such texts has for the comparatist. More specifically, I draw on two case studies, an article written for the magazine *Epoca* in 1959, and a series of poems portraying the Parisian May 1968, built on the principle of comparability between historically and geographically distant events. In examining these texts, I distinguish between ‘vertical comparison’, that is, comparison that establishes a relation between events positioned at different historical times, and ‘horizontal comparisons’, which connect contemporary, geographically distant events. While horizontal comparisons are necessarily transnational, vertical comparison can involve *comparanda* based within or beyond the nation. In de Céspedes’ works, horizontal comparisons issue a desire for translation, but at the same time prevent the translation from taking place, due to the contentious relationship between comparison and censorship evoked by the text in the target context. For similar reasons, vertical comparisons also become an

issue for translation when *comparanda* are positioned across nations. This type of text is thus particularly interesting for comparatists, as it offers an apt ground to discuss the links between comparability, translatability, and the role of censorship in the production of historical narratives.

World literature theories tend to align comparability with translatability: the more a work circulates in translation, the more it becomes suitable for the work of the comparatist.¹⁰ But in the case of de Céspedes' poems, it is precisely the hyper-comparability of the poems themselves that limits, or prevents, their circulation in translation. In turn, untranslatability makes the texts significant precisely because it prompts a reflection on the socio-political factors that limit comparability. Although de Céspedes' poems involve linguistic complexities, my take on untranslatability in this article does not have to do with issues of language, as in Barbara Cassin's and Emily Apter's theories,¹¹ but rather with censorship. The focus on censorship highlights how translatability, in the case of *Chansons des filles de mai* (May Girls Songs), is first and foremost a political project.

In her own time, Alba de Céspedes (1911-1997) was an internationally successful best-selling author. After disappearing from bookstores for many years, her works are recently experiencing a newfound popularity worldwide,¹² which in turn has translated into renewed critical interest in this author. Rather than starting from the composition of the poems and moving to their afterlife in translation, I will invert the hierarchy usually established between 'original' and 'translation' by beginning my analysis from the impasse that marked de Céspedes work as 'untranslatable' to then work my way back to the issues of in/comparability.

Untranslatability

Among Alba de Céspedes' correspondence, which is held at the author's archive at the Mondadori Foundation in Milan, we find a letter by Heberto Padilla written on October 25, 1970. In this letter, the Cuban poet, journalist and translator comments on de Céspedes' collections of poems on the Parisian 1968 insurrections, *Chansons des filles de mai*, written in French immediately after the May uprisings and published in the same year by Editions Du Seuil. Padilla expresses his enthusiasm for the poems, praises de Céspedes' creative use of French, and announces that he has begun translating the collection:

... he comenzado a traducir – por puro disfrute personal, para que puedas leerlos en mis versiones hechas con el mayor amor - esos poemas tuyos que, leídos ahora en su conjunto, me han impresionado agradablemente. Me gustan mucho, me gustan todos, me gustan hasta los que no me gustan. Me reconozco en ese lenguaje directo, apasionado [...]. Me pregunto cómo habrán acogido a los franceses tu lenguaje inmediato. Tal vez la historia le haya prestado un incentivo distinto y entiendan tus poemas más por lo que dicen que como lo dices. En Cuba, estoy seguro, gustarían muchísimo. Y yo haré mis mejores esfuerzos por ponerlos en una lengua que parezca la original. Veremos'.

(I have begun translating - for pure personal enjoyment, so that you can read them in my versions, made with the greatest love - those poems of yours that, now that I have read them as a whole, have pleasantly impressed me. I like them a lot, I like them all, I like even the ones I don't like. I recognize myself in that direct, passionate language [...]. I wonder how the French have received your immediate language. Perhaps history has given you a distinctive incentive and they understand your poems more for what they say than for how you say it. In Cuba, I'm sure, they would be very much liked. And I will do my best to put them in a language that resembles the original. We will see.)¹³

The judgement from the poet-translator is positive: de Céspedes' idiosyncratic language is not viewed as an obstacle but rather as a pleasant challenge for the poet-translator. While there are doubts on how French readers will receive poems written in 'accented' French, Padilla is certain that the urgency of the topic (the 1968 demonstrations) will take precedence over language questions. He also seems confident that poems would – and the use of the conditional should alert us here – please Cuban readers. Padilla includes, as an homage, his translation of the first poem of the collection, 'La peur' (fear), in which the protagonist is a Cuban student involved in the French 1968 demonstrations, a gesture that

confirms the poems can be transposed into Spanish. The scope of the translations as ‘personal enjoyment’, however, hints to a more complex picture. Other sections of the letter, in fact, shed doubts about the poems’ translatability:

Tampoco el Instituto del libro se ha comunicado conmigo. Todo ha sido silencio en torno al proyecto de traducción que creí estaba decidido según nuestra última conversación en el Hotel Habana Libre. Como me he ido acostumbrando lentamente a estas situaciones, para mí no ha sido sorpresa alguna que los funcionarios del Instituto no me hayan comunicado absolutamente nada en relación con la traducción de tus *Chansons*.

(The *Instituto del libro* has not communicated with me. Everything has been silent around the translation project that I thought had been decided during our last conversation at the Hotel Habana Libre. As I have slowly gotten used to these situations, it has not come as a surprise to me that the officials of the *Instituto* have not communicated anything to me in relation to the translation of your *Chansons*).¹⁴

The *Instituto del libro* mentioned by Padilla was the government organization in charge of publishing and promoting books in Cuba, as well of approving the publications of translations by foreign writers. Padilla’s compromised situation begins to emerge here. Not long after writing the letter, in 1971, the poet-translator would be arrested without charges and forced, in Stalinist fashion, to declare himself guilty of harbouring counter-revolutionary ideas. The ensuing scandal is known as the ‘Padilla affair’, and marked for many international leftists the end of a utopic vision in which the political and artistic avant-garde would merge in post-revolutionary Cuba. However, Padilla’s position is not quite sufficient to explain why de Céspedes’ poems were not published in Cuba. To understand the causes of this impasse, we must take a step back and look at the genesis of these works in the context of de Céspedes’ career and her status as an Italian/Francophone writer, as well as a cultural ambassador for Cuba, and examine the comparisons that underpin the poems.

Paris and Havana, 1968: First Comparisons

De Céspedes was born into an established international family: her father, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y de Quesada, was, at the time of her birth in 1911, the Cuban ambassador in

Rome; her mother, Laura Bertini, came from a wealthy Roman family. Her paternal grandfather, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y del Castillo (1819-1874), was the first Cuban president and is known in Cuba as ‘father of the nation’ for proclaiming the country’s independence from Spain in 1868.

When Alba de Céspedes was three years old, her father was appointed ambassador in Washington, and she was left in the care of her maternal and paternal aunts. She thus grew up between Rome and the outskirts of Paris, where her father’s sister lived. Home-schooled, she married at the age of fifteen to obtain Italian citizenship. She had a child at sixteen, and shortly after she separated from her husband and began publishing articles and short stories in *Il Mattino*, *Il Piccolo* and *Il Messaggero*. Her first novel, *Io, suo padre* (1935),¹⁵ was written for the competition launched by the *Italian National Olympic Committee* to represent Italy at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. As Ulla Åkerström notes, the novel displays elements typical of fascist propaganda, and is not only in line with, but even exalts fascist values.¹⁶ In the same year in which the novel was published, on February 12, de Céspedes was arrested and detained at Rome’s notorious female prison ‘le Mantellate’, and freed six days later thanks to her father’s intervention. De Céspedes gives different accounts of the reason for this arrest.¹⁷ According to Åkerström, she was officially detained for the telephone tapping of a conversation in which she had commented that Italians would be fools to start a war against Abyssinia, but had become suspicious because of her nonconformist personal conduct as a single mother determined to make a living out of her own writing.¹⁸ The first novel published by Mondadori, *Nessuno torna indietro* (No one turns back, 1938), about a female student house in Rome, became an instant best-seller in Italy, and had extraordinary success abroad: it was translated in over 22 countries and 18 languages. In 1941, an anonymous letter accused the book of immorality for providing a model for young women, and mothers, that was not in line with fascist values, and a ban was imposed (but soon lifted) on reprinting the novel.

Similar reasons, in 1941, prevented the script for a film based on the novel from being approved, and de Céspedes obtained the authorization only by promising a new version that eliminated problematic characters and presented an ‘ambiente collettivo goliardico italiano, sereno e ottimista (‘serene and optimistic Italian goliardic collective environment’).¹⁹

When, in 1943, Rome was occupied by German troops, her partner Franco Bounous, a diplomat, was in a difficult position and the two left the city and hid in Abruzzo. There, de Céspedes directed the radio programme ‘Italia combatte’ (‘Italy fights’) for radio Bari. Under the pseudonym of Clorinda, she narrated daily life in occupied Italy. After a stay in Naples, she returned to Rome and founded the journal *Mercurio* (1944-1958), which became an important venue for anti-fascist intellectuals and saw contributions of illustrious writers such as Sibilla Aleramo, Anna Banti, Natalia Ginzburg, Alberto Moravia, Mario Luzi, and Aldo Palazzeschi. Special issues of the journal were dedicated to the history of the Resistance in the North and South of Italy.²⁰ *Nessuno torna indietro* was followed by other international best-sellers, including *Dalla parte di lei* (1959), *Quaderno proibito* (1952) and *Il rimorso* (1963), all published by Mondadori. In the late 1950s, her fame began to wane; she became dissatisfied with how Mondadori was promoting her work and felt that she was not given the place that she deserved by Italian critics: ‘si dimentica, mi si confina tra le scrittrici femminili’ (‘they forget about me, they relegate me among female writers’),²¹ she wrote in her diary in 1957. She was also uncomfortable with contemporary Italian politics and felt that the country had forgotten the aspirations and visions shaped during the Resistance, giving in to consumerism, capitalism and fascist revivals.

In 1967, she took up residence in Paris. At the age of 56, she made a first attempt at translingual writing and started working on the novel that would later be published as *Sans autre lieu que la nuit* (There is no place but the night, 1973).²² This is also the period in which she strengthened her links to Cuba. Despite her family history, her connections to the

island had been limited. She had visited Cuba for the first time in 1939, as her father was very ill, and after her father's death, had returned in the 1950s to make caring arrangements for her mother. Her last visit to pre-revolutionary Cuba took place in 1956, the year in which Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara gathered guerrilla fighters and started a war against Fulgencio Batista's government. In the following years, the revolution spread through Cuba, and de Céspedes' properties were confiscated, leaving her no reason to return to the island.

From an article published in 1959 in Mondadori's magazine *Epoca*,²³ where de Céspedes held a weekly column, we know that she had been following the Cuban Revolution from a distance. The article opens with a statement in support of Castro: 'L'anno comincia bene. Fidel Castro ha costretto Batista ad abbandonare il governo di Cuba e a fuggire all'estero.' ('This year begins well. Fidel Castro forced Batista to abandon the Cuban government and to escape abroad.')²⁴ The rest of the article consists of a series of intertwined comparisons that, like dominoes, share a *comparandum* and draw attention to similarities and differences between powerful Cuban and Italian leaders. Through a vertical comparison, de Céspedes first juxtaposes her father, who was briefly president of Cuba in 1933, and US-backed dictator Fulgencio Batista, who ruled Cuba from 1940 to 1944, and from 1952 to 1959. The difference between the two men, she remarks, stands out in their behaviour at the moment in which they were forced to leave the government: her father left gracefully and with dignity, refused compromise, and chose to remain in Cuba whereas Batista cowardly abandoned the country to save his own life. The memory of a joke on Batista by the right-wing publisher Leopoldo Longanesi in 1939 then becomes the pretext for a comparison between Batista and Benito Mussolini, whose name, de Céspedes adds with characteristic nonchalance, also resembles that of a textile.²⁵ Outspoken about her aversion to Batista, she notes that, nevertheless, in the comparison with the Italian dictator, the former Cuban leader stands out as the lesser evil: 'pur detestando Batista, dovevo riconoscere che egli non aveva

emanato nel proprio paese una legge contro gli ebrei, né avrebbe mai osato dichiarare guerra a una potenza come gli Stati Uniti e la mondo intero' ('while I detested Batista, I had to admit that he had not passed a law against Jews in his own country, nor would he have ever dared to declare war on a power like the United States and the whole world') (p. 59). The comparison that follows still involves Batista, but this time the *comparandum* is Fidel Castro. Taking the stance of the physiognomist, de Céspedes compares the photographs of the two Cuban leaders published side by side by European newspapers: 'dietro lo sguardo furbesco, l'aspetto solido, tutto materiale, di Batista vi sono quegli affaristi pronti alla camorra, all'imbroglio (numerosi anche nel nostro paese) e dietro l'aspetto grave, romantico di Fidel Castro vi sono *los abogados, los letrados, los licenciados*' ('behind Batista's sly expression, solid, material look, there are those businessmen ready to deal with the Camorra, ready to cheat (numerous also in our country') and behind the serious, romantic aspect of Fidel Castro, there are *los abogados, los letrados, los licenciados*) (p.59).²⁶ She then develops a vertical comparison between Castro and her grandfather that involves elements of upbringing, background, and ideology:

Mio nonno, nell'abolire la schiavitù, disse ai proprio schiavi che rappresentavano, per lui, un importante capitale: 'e per provarvi che siamo tutti liberali tutti voi siete liberi.' Anche lui era avvocato, figlio di ricchi, studioso di storia e di filosofia; anche lui, come Fidel Castro, bruciò la sua casa, che conteneva una importante biblioteca, bruciò le sue piantagioni, il suo 'ingenio' *La Demajagua* (le cui rovine sono oggi venerato monumento nazionale) e con la campana che serviva per chiamare al lavoro gli operai chiamò i cubani delle provincia di Oriente alla rivoluzione. Anche lui, come in un recente passato Fidel Castro, era rimasto con pochi uomini.

(As he abolished slavery, my grandfather said to his slaves, who represented, for him, an important capital: 'and to prove to you that we are all liberals, you are all free.' He too was a lawyer, son of wealthy people, a scholar of history and philosophy; he too, like Fidel Castro, burned down his house, which contained an important library, burned down his plantations, his 'ingenio' *La Demajagua* (whose ruins are now revered as a national monument) and, with the bell that was used to call to work the workmen, called the Cubans of the Oriental province to the revolution. He too, like Fidel Castro in the recent past, was left with few men.) (p. 59)

Vertical comparisons that established a relation between the actions of Castro and her grandfather, although daring and, in calling attention to the role of wealthy elites in the revolutionary process,²⁷ decisively awkward, were nevertheless in line with Castro's rhetoric. Castro, in fact, argued that the revolution was a continuation of the endeavour begun by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes y del Castillo and José Martí during the wars of independence: just as de Céspedes and Martí had forced out of Cuba the Spanish colonisers, the Revolution had fought Batista and ended US imperialist rule in Cuba.

In contrast, horizontal comparisons that established a connection between pre-revolutionary Cuba and fascist Italy were de Céspedes' own making, born out of her desire to see in the Cuban Revolution a continuity with the ethics and ideals that had characterised the Italian Resistance movement, of which the Communist Party, in the Italian context, claimed to be the heir.²⁸

On January 2, 1968, at the invitation of Haidée Santamaria, de Céspedes travelled for the first time to post-revolutionary Cuba to act as a jury member for the annual literary prize of the cultural institution *Casa de las Americas*.²⁹ In Cuba, she was received as the granddaughter of a national hero, and was hosted at the *Hotel Habana libre*, the hotel for foreigners which, in a curious coincidence, had been built on the site of her parent's former residence. On January 12, she participated as an Italian delegate in the Cultural Congress of Havana, in which over four hundred intellectuals discussed their role in the revolution and the fight against imperialism in the Third World. De Céspedes spoke of her role as a board member of the *National union for the fight against illiteracy*, founded in the post-war years to address the inability of a large part of the Italian population to read and write. She then compared the work undertaken in Italy to the eight-month long effort to abolish illiteracy in Cuba after the Cuban Revolution: 'Aquí se he ha hecho un gran labor en el campo de la educación, especialmente en las zonas rurales, donde más falta hacía. Considero muy

importante estudiar esta obra de la Revolución en las áreas del interior' ('Great work has been done here in the field of education, especially in rural areas, where it was most needed. I consider it very important to study this work of the Revolution in the interior areas').³⁰ In the 1959 article in *Epoca*, she had introduced vertical and horizontal comparisons that exposed the links she perceived between the Cuban and the Italian contexts. In 1968, vertical comparisons between Italy and Cuba became a means to insert her own history, as an intellectual who had participated in the Resistance Movement, into this comparative web.

Paris, May 1968: Comparability

On her return to Paris, de Céspedes enthusiastically followed the developments of the May insurrections. The result was a collection of poems in French, in which the author lends her voice to young women who participated in the Parisian uprisings, titled *Chansons des filles de Mai*. In a letter to Paul Flamand, her editor at Le Seuil, she indicated that the poems originated in a dual translation process:

La sera del 30 maggio, quando il nostro quartiere era immerso nel silenzio, ho preso il mio diario, ho scritto la data, come al solito, e ho cominciato a scrivere questo diario in forma di poema [...] E alla fine mi ritrovavo ad essere non più una donna scrittrice di 57 anni, ma una piccola cubana che studiava a Parigi, come in *Auto-portrait*, come in *Ma soeur Pilar*, come in *lettre à una mère*. Ero la piccola cubana e la piccola francese, ero tutte le ragazze di maggio, e in fondo lo sono rimasta. [...] Forse bisognerà che io scriva una breve prefazione: qualche riga. Dei giornalisti hanno pubblicato, di questi tempi, delle specie di interviste, discorsi raccolti fra i giovani che hanno partecipato agli eventi o che li hanno visti da vicino. Se lo crede, potrei dire che ho raccolto discorsi, confessioni, da "ragazze di maggio" vere o immaginarie, e che il clima del momento, e il loro stato d'animo era più vicino alla poesia che alla realtà: ecco perché li ho tradotti in forma di poemi.

(On the evening of May 30, when our neighbourhood was silent, I took my diary, I wrote the date, as usual, and I began to write this diary in the form of a poem [...] And in the end I was no longer a 57-year-old woman writer, but a little Cuban who studied in Paris, as in *Auto-portrait*, as in *Ma soeur Pilar*, as in *Lettre à una mère*. I was the little Cuban and the little French, I was all the May girls, and deep down I am still one of them. [...] Maybe I should write a brief preface: a few lines. Some journalists have published, lately, some sort of interviews, speeches by young people who participated in the events or who followed them closely. If you agree, I could say that I collected speeches, confessions, by real or imaginary 'May girls', and that the climate of the

moment and their mood was closer to poetry than to reality: that's why I translated them into poems).³¹

These poems are thus 'born in translation', although not quite in the sense suggested by Rebecca Walkowitz's influential definition, which refers to works in which the language of narration differs from the idiom spoken by the characters in the fictional setting.³² In this case, the poems originate in the words of 'real or imaginary' French speakers. These words, in turn, inspire a ghost Italian text, the diary entry which is never completed. In the second part of the letter, de Céspedes proposes adopting a device common to narratives written around 1968,³³ namely to pretend that the poems are a transposition of interviews. This move would have underlined her involvement in the 1968 demonstrations, providing a justification for writing in French through the commitment to render faithfully an oral witness. However, she acknowledges her role as mediator by using the term 'translated' to describe the process of adaptation from interviews to poems. Her understanding of translation here is not interlingual, but refers to a transposition across genres, from political journalism to poetry. The protagonists of her poems, among whom several Cubans who experience the 1968 Parisian events as foreigners, are a projection of herself, and speak of her condition as a transnational writer who felt alienated by the cultural establishment of her own country and of the new connections she perceived with Cuba.

The suggestion of presenting the poems as interviews was probably not welcomed by publishers at Le Seuil, and was dropped in the text printed on the back cover of the French edition. Here, de Céspedes takes on the role of the listener, and underlines how the language of composition was bound to the language of the events; the events were, in other words, untranslatable:

Durant les mois de mai et de juin 1968, j'étais à Paris, dans un studio, rue de Tournon. J'ai l'habitude de travailler la nuit, et c'est ainsi que dès le premier cri, le premier choc, je me suis détachée des événements et des personnages de mon roman : je ne faisais

plus qu'écouter, essayer de deviner ce qui se passait, aidée par le transistor que je ne pouvais interrompre.

Et puis, dans la rue, à la Sorbonne, à l'Odéon, j'ai regardé des jeunes, des filles. Des filles qui devenaient à mes yeux les héroïnes de cette révolte, premier signe éclatant du combat qui changera notre société. [...] Ces jours, ces nuits, ces dialogues que je voulais d'abord simplement noter, en Italien, dans mon journal, se sont présentés à mon moi, impérativement, comme acteurs et instants d'un seul poème, un poème que je ne pouvais écrire que dans la langue et dans les mots qui gouvernaient ces journées.

(During the months of May and June 1968, I was in Paris, in a studio flat, in rue de Tournon. I'm used to working at night, and that's how from the first cry, the first shock, I detached myself from the events and characters of my novel: I did nothing but listen, trying to guess what was going on, aided by the radio which I could not turn off.

And then, in the street, at the Sorbonne, at the Odéon, I watched some young people, some young women. Young women who in my eyes became the heroines of this insurrection, the first bright sign of the fight that will change our society. [...] Those days, those nights, those dialogues that I simply wanted to write down, in Italian, in my diary, presented themselves to me, imperatively, as actors and moments of a single poem, a poem that I could not write only in the language and in the words that governed those days.)³⁴

Scholars of de Céspedes tend to take the author at face value, and to attribute the choice of writing in French to the subject matter selected.³⁵ However, de Céspedes' translingual move has first and foremost to do with her desire to reinvent her image as a writer. Writing in a second language gave her the opportunity to start again, with new audiences and new readers: 'C'est bon d'être un jeune auteur français qui présente son premier manuscrit!' (It's great to be a young French author presenting their first manuscript!) she wrote to Flamand.³⁶

At the core of these poems, read as whole, are two implicit comparisons. The first, a vertical comparison, connects the insurrections of 1968 to the fight against fascism during World War II. Sabina Ciminari has noted that, in the dedication of the copy gifted to the Italian politician and ex-Resistance fighter, Ferruccio Parri, de Céspedes wrote that the poems 'marcano giornate simili a quelle, fulgide, della nostra Resistenza' ('describe days similar to the brilliant days of our Resistance').³⁷ This comparison is developed in the longest piece of the collection, 'La grande saison' (The great season), where we learn that the air of Paris during the 1968 insurrections smells of 'Resistance' and 'maquis' (underbrush, p. 76), a

reference to the French citizens drafted by the Germans who refused to follow the orders and joined guerrilla bands. Charles de Gaulle, addressed in the poem as 'le Grand Vieux' ('the big old man'), is criticised for having abandoned the ideals of the Resistance in ordering the repression of the insurrections:

Je parie que s'il avait
vingt ans,
il serait avec nous :
il sortirait sa vieille veste
de résistant,
il passerait le pont
de la Concorde,
et il viendrait sur ce rivage
où fleurissent l'imagination
et l'audace

(I bet if he was
twenty,
he would be with us:
he would pull out his old jacket
of Resistance fighter,
he would cross the Pont
de la Concord,
and he would come to this side of the river
where imagination
and audacity flourish). (p. 80)

The lack of continuity in de Gaulle's trajectory, his failure to uphold the vertical comparison and to honour the ideals of the Resistance by supporting the 1968 movement, is attributed to the generation gap. Through such comments, de Céspedes emphasises by contrast her own 'youth', her faithfulness to the ideal of the Resistance and consequent support of the young

people in the movement. Ciminari has uncovered how the many drafts of this poem preserved at the archive show that de Céspedes modified the lines about de Gaulle at the request of her editors at Le Seuil.³⁸ The author insisted that the collection be published as soon as possible, in an affordable paperback edition to maximise the impact of the poems, but was prepared to tolerate limitations to her freedom of expression.

The second, horizontal comparison connects the insurrections of 1968 to the Cuban revolution of 1959 – a phenomenon to which Ciminari refers as ‘convergenza delle rivoluzioni’ (‘convergence of revolutions’).³⁹ As de Céspedes underlines in her letter to Flamand, several of the poems feature Cuban protagonists; this is obvious in ‘La peur’ (Fear), and ‘Ma soeur Pilar’ (My sister Pilar), but in the above-mentioned letter to Flamand, the author describes as ‘Cuban’ also the protagonists of ‘Auto-portrait’ (Self-portrait) and ‘Lettre à una mère’ (Letters to a mother). In ‘La peur’ (Fear), the poem that Padilla chose to translate into Spanish, Borjita Paz, a Cuban student named after the sister of the author’s grandfather,⁴⁰ recalls her experience in participating in the uprising, the fear she experienced in the confrontation with the police:

J’avais peur, j’avais
tellement peur,
que je me tenais raide
contre ce mur,
sans bouger,
sans crier,
mes yeux dans les yeux
du policier.

I was scared, I was
so scared,
that I stood stiff

against this wall,
without moving,
without shouting,
my eyes locked on the eyes of
the policeman. (p.10)

Featuring a Cuban protagonist allows de Céspedes to underline the inclusive dimension of the 1968 movement, while Borjita's confrontations with the police implicitly recalls the courage of Cubans during the rebellion against Batista. The poem is set in Paris, but through Borjita's thoughts, it leads the reader to post-Revolutionary Cuba; for example, during her arrest, Borjita imagines her obituary published in *Grandma*, the official newspaper of the communist party in Cuba, and the pension that will be allocated to her mother. In this poem, the horizontal comparison contains within it a vertical comparison, as Borjita compares the handcuffs she is forced to wear during her arrest to those worn by her enslaved ancestors, freed during the independence war led by Carlos Manuel de Céspedes in 1868, a hundred years earlier – an event which in turn, in the article on *Epoca*, de Céspedes had compared to the 1959 Revolution. Just like 'La Peur', 'Ma sœur Pilar', which revolves around two estranged Cuban sisters who meet again on the barricades, is set in Paris, but obliquely refers to Cuba. When the younger sister mentions her place of birth in la Havana, this is sufficient to trigger panic in the mother of her fiancée: 'Cuba: un frisson, le barbus!' (Cuba: a shiver, the bearded ones!) (p. 44). These lines draw attention to the inability of the older generation to understand either the Cuban Revolution or the 1968 uprisings, implicitly reinforcing the link between the two events. The two sisters, in Paris, battle against racism on a daily level, an issue that Cuban Revolutionaries claimed to have resolved. In emphasizing how the barricades have abolished racial difference, the poem attributes the same outcome to the 1968 insurrections:

Je lui ai dit:
'Nous sommes tous Noirs,
ici, tous maudits,
les Blancs aussi.
Notre sang a la même couleur :
je l'ai vu.'

(I told her :
'we are all black,
here, we are all cursed,
whites people too.
Our blood has the same color:
I saw it.')

 (p. 46)

In 'La grande saison', there are references to Guevara's unknown burial ground (p.89), and the narrators refer to the conspiracy theories according to which the 1968 movements were orchestrated by 'une grande organisation internationale soutenue par les francs-maçons' (a large international organization supported by Freemasons) (p. 85), controlled by communists, Cubans among them. Today, such conspiracy theories will sound familiar to readers exposed to narratives surrounding the origins of COVID-19 and the war against Ukraine. De Céspedes mentions them as to demonstrate the differences in ways of thinking between the older and younger generations, as well as to ridicule the French fear of communism. Nevertheless, the links that she perceives between the French 1968 and the Cuban Revolution are profound.

It is well known that Cuban revolutionaries were inspirational to those involved in the 1968 uprisings, as illustrated in the poems by references to posters featuring Che Guevara decorating students' rooms (p.166).⁴¹ However, for de Céspedes, the relationship between the two historical events goes beyond this. In her eyes, the Cuban Revolution and

the 1968 insurrections share a core similarity as social movements opposed to the established order and prevailing injustices; in both, she sees catalysts that will lead to further revolts and change political systems across the world. Despite the short life of the demonstrations and the apparent return to normality, the changes provoked by the uprisings are portrayed as irreversible. The energy and anger of the 1968 demonstrators find embodiment in a ball of fire that rolls over countries and continents, its impact emphasised by the creative use of space in the poem:

... rien n'est plus
comme avant :
nous le savons
et vous aussi. [...]
Le feu de nos barricades
est une boule de feu
qui roule,
roule,
roule,
de pays an pays
une mèche allumé qui court
de Rome à Paris
de Varsovie à Bonn
de Mexico à Washington...

Allez les garçons, allez
les filles,
déchirez les cartes
géographiques,
l'air de ce printemps
arrive jusqu'aux prisons
de Madrid, de Moscou, d'Athènes,
de Bolive,

jusqu'aux slums noirs
du Kentucky,
jusqu'à la tombe de Luther
King,
Jusqu'au tumulus ignoré
Du Che.

(... nothing is like before:
we know it,
and you know it too [...]
The fire of our barricades
is a ball of fire
that rolls
 rolls
 rolls
from country to country
a lit wick that runs
 from Rome to Paris
 from Warsaw to Bonn
 from Mexico City to Washington.

Come on boys, come on
girls,
tear up geographic
maps,
the air of this spring
will reach the prisons
of Madrid, Moscow, Athens,
of Bolivia,
the black slums
of Kentucky,
the grave of Luther

King,
the unknown burial ground
of Che.) (p.89)⁴²

Vertical and horizontal comparisons prompt a desire for translation and determine de Céspedes' choice of target audiences. While *Chansons* was written for the French, de Céspedes was from the outset planning a version for Italian and Cuban readers. With the so-called 'hot autumn' in Italy, which began in the summer of 1969 with workers demonstrations in the Northeast, she became even more concerned with the immediacy of her political message and self-translated all the poems into Italian. *Le ragazze di Maggio* was published by Mondadori in a dual French and Italian edition in 1970, and in a second edition in 1971. De Céspedes did not attempt to re-establish original lines on de Gaulle, modified at the request of Le Seuil, but took the opportunity to implement her original idea and to present the book as the result of interviews. The text printed on the book jacket of the Mondadori edition was similar to the one on the back cover of the French edition, but emphasised the author's key role in the production of revolutionary speech: 'Di giorno uscivo, mi recavo alla Sorbona, all'Odéon, assistevo ai dibattiti, alle riunioni, e lì come nelle strade devastate, dissecciate, ingombre di automobili carbonizzate e puzzolenti di gas – incontravo i giovani rivoluzionari, li interrogavo, li spingevo a parlare.' ('During the day I went out, I went to the Sorbonne, to the Odéon, I attended the debates, the meetings, and there, as in the devastated, unpaved streets, cluttered with burned cars which smelled of gas - I met the young revolutionaries, I interviewed them, I urged them to speak').⁴³

Moreover, while the French edition lacks an author's blurb, the book jacket of the Italian edition emphasises de Céspedes' participation in the Resistance through the collaboration with Radio Bari and the journal *Mercurio*, and underlines that her early books were sabotaged by fascist censorship: 'Il suo primo romanzo *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938)

fu ‘fermato’ dalla censura fascista; la stessa sorte toccò ai racconti di *Fuga* (1940)’ (‘Her first novel *Nessuno torna indietro* (1938) was stopped by fascist censorship; the same fate befell the collection of short stories *Fuga* (1940)’). It is not surprising that *Io, suo Padre*, which deployed elements of fascist propaganda, is erased from this record. Nor does the text mention the fact that the ban on new editions of *Nessuno torna indietro* was easily circumvented by Mondadori, who claimed that reprints were leftover copies from the first edition, and that it thus had the opposite effect of contributing to the novel’s sales.⁴⁴

De Céspedes’ translation is effectively a rewriting: she sometimes renders Parisian locations or other specific references with more generic Italian equivalent, but she also adopts the opposite strategy, substituting generic terms with more specific ones; at times, she substitutes the name of a street with that of another street with similar features.⁴⁵ Her focus is not so much on accuracy or comprehensibility but on the text’s musicality and on reader’s ability to picture the scene. A significant difference from the French edition is the addition of a glossary, which enables de Céspedes to provide information about the key places and dates of the 1968 insurrections, as well as about the places and historical events in Cuba mentioned in the poem ‘La peur’, which would have been equally unfamiliar to French and Italian readers. Curiously, the glossary is not based on the Italian, but on the French text, and invites readers to compare words used in the two texts, thus symbolically addressing what is missing in the text: a dialogue between the French and the Italian 1968.⁴⁶ The glossary is thus also a meta-text, a reflection on the impossibility, and yet the reality of translation: for example, we find references to terms in the French text that de Céspedes defines as ‘untranslatable’, but for which she nevertheless provides an Italian equivalent.⁴⁷

The rewriting does not affect the two overarching comparisons. The horizontal comparison is in fact even emphasised by the references to Cuban history and geography provided in the glossary. References to the Resistance movement persist, and are sometimes

underlined in the translation – for example, de Gaulle is not only addressed as a resistant fighter, but also as ‘compagno della liberazione’ (brother of Liberation) (p. 157). However, de Céspedes did not take the opportunity to elaborate on this comparison further in the glossary.

The collection of poems was published after the author had publicly declared her adhesion to the Italian Communist Party in 1969.⁴⁸ The climate of those years in Italy was one of mass protests, terrorism, neo-fascist revivals and economic instability. However, the subject of the poems was not the Italian but the French 1968, and the vertical comparison did not call into question contemporary Italian politics nor challenge established narratives of history. While politically positioned, the collection of poems was thus not particularly controversial. It rather testified to de Céspedes’ engagement with international politics and underlined her recognition as a published writer in Paris.

Given the close links that de Céspedes perceived between the Cuban revolution and the Parisian 1968, the next target readership was in Cuba.

Cuba, October 1968: In/comparability

Several watershed historical events took place between de Céspedes’ first and second trips to Cuba in 1968. In March, Cuba launched the ‘Revolutionary offensive,’ a project aimed at the total nationalization of the island’s economy, including small family-owned businesses. In August, Castro, who had been silent about the Prague spring, backed the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia. On October 2, he did not take a stance on the Tlatelolco massacre in Mexico City, in which the police, 10 days before the Olympic games, opened fire on demonstrators killing over 350 students.

While these events distanced many international leftists from Cuban revolutionaries, de Céspedes strengthened her links to the country. The main reason for her second trip was to participate in the celebrations for the centenary of the independence wars started by her

grandfather on October 10, 1868, which were held at what had been her family estate at the Demajagua, a plantation near Manzanillo. On October 10, she delivered a speech after Fidel Castro. Among the notes in her archive, we find an excerpt from the speech that Castro's gave on that day:

Che significa per il nostro popolo il 10 ottobre 1862? Che significa per i rivoluzionari della nostra patria quella data gloriosa? Significa semplicemente l'inizio di cento anni di lotta, l'inizio della rivoluzione, perché a Cuba v'è stata una unica rivoluzione: quella che iniziò Carlos Manuel de Céspedes il 10 ottobre 1868 e che il nostro popolo porta avanti oggi.

(What does October 10, 1862 mean for our people? What does that glorious date mean for the revolutionaries of our homeland? It simply means the beginning of a hundred years of struggle, the beginning of the revolution, because there was only one revolution in Cuba: the one that Carlos Manuel de Céspedes began on 10 October 1868 and that our people carry on today.)⁴⁹

The vertical comparison de Céspedes developed in *Epoca* was thus not only in line with, but, as we can see from the above citation, directly built upon official government rhetoric. On her return to La Havana, de Céspedes took part as a jury member in the evaluation of the prizes conferred by the *National Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba* (UNEAC). Here, she witnessed the debate surrounding the jury's choice to award the 'Julián del Casal' poetry prize to Heberto Padilla's collection of poems *Fuera del juego* (Out of game).

Padilla had been a supporter of the revolution and was personally acquainted with Castro; in the early 1960s, he had collaborated with Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and Massimo Riva on an Italian biography of the leader. When Castro withdrew his collaboration, Padilla worked with Riva on a project on Cuban literary dissidents.⁵⁰ His support of exiled Cuban authors and criticism of high-ranking officials subsequently placed him at the centre of a series of polemics, and by the time in which the UNEAC contest took place, he was no longer well regarded by government officials. In the UNEAC jury's view, *Fuera del juego*, which

dwelled, among other themes, on the role of the poet in the Revolutionary process, offered constructive criticism, rather than apologetic approval, and was thus on the side of the Revolution. The executive committee of the UNEAC instead condemned Padilla's exaltation of individualism, which they perceived as contrasting with collective demands.⁵¹ The book was eventually published, since this was a condition of the award, but with the addition of a preface by the UNEAC committee which denounced its counter-revolutionary ideology. These conditions did not prevent the circulation of the book, but radically conditioned its reception.

De Céspedes was only partially involved in the debate; we know that she did not explicitly defend Padilla, and that she backed the Cuban government.⁵² Nevertheless, she recommended Padilla's works to Alberto Mondadori for translation into Italian, describing him as 'il miglior poeta della sua generazione' (the best poet of his generation).¹ Aware that censorship in one context could turn into a marketing strategy in the other, she noted that it was a great time to translate the poems, since the polemics surrounding *Fuera del juego* would make him even more famous.⁵³ She also offered to Padilla the translation of *Chansons*: as an eminent poet and a translator from French, he seemed to her the person most suited to this task. Moreover, only a non-conformist would take up the task of translating a series of poems about the Parisian 1968, which stressed the transnational, global character of the movement. In fact, Cuban revolutionaries, including students' organizations, had neither participated in the 1968 demonstrations nor backed the Parisian uprisings. De Gaulle had refused to join the US line against Cuba, and had agreed to continue trade; at a time in which Cuba was facing increasing isolation and the US embargo, Castro could not afford to support a movement that threatened to overthrow a crucial ally. Similarly, although the Mexican

¹ Alba de Céspedes to Alberto Mondadori, September 7, 1970, now in Gonzales, *Alba de Céspedes en Cuba*, p. 89.

movement began on July 26, on the anniversary of the first armed action of the Cuban revolution,⁵⁴ Castro had tried to dissociate from the demonstrations, taking a non-interventionist stance, and discouraging those who carried Cuban banners.⁵⁵ After the Tlatelalco massacre of October 2, *Granma*, the official journal of the communist party, only partially covered the case, and reported victims' numbers according to the official figures provided by the Mexican government.⁵⁶

Chansons was a militant text that predicted the end of neo-liberal, capitalist societies. Given the revolutionary's fight for freedom from US imperialism, the opposition to foreign corporations and the recent battle to nationalise all businesses, Cuba might have seemed at first sight a suitable target context. However, the above-cited letter by Padilla to de Céspedes, in which the poet-translator comments on the impasse with the *Instituto del libro*, proves that this was not the case. The problem was not so much de Céspedes' idiosyncratic language, which Padilla was willing to engage with, nor his own controversial status (for he was allowed to translate other works), but de Céspedes' enthusiastic support for the 1968 demonstrators, and her horizontal comparison between the Parisian uprising and the Cuban revolution. Control on intellectuals was tightening, and, as Carlos Aguirre has argued, by adopting an authoritarian cultural policy, the Cuban government was 'trying to prevent a Cuban version of 1968'.⁵⁷ While the message of the *Chansons* was in line with the country's radical politics, the comparison that underpinned the text and the support of the insurrection made the poems untranslatable.

A few months after sending his letter to de Céspedes, on March 20, 1971, Padilla was imprisoned without charges. Several international intellectuals, including Jean Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir – who, like de Céspedes, had backed the 1968 movement – published in *Le Monde* a letter addressed to Castro, in which they expressed their concern and asked the Cuban leader to reassess the situation. Padilla was released under international

pressure, but was forced to read a statement of self-criticism at a UNEAC meeting, in which he acknowledged harbouring counter-revolutionary ideology. In this context, the poem Padilla chose to translate from *Chansons de filles de mai* acquires a different meaning, as the ‘fear’ evoked by the text, the oppressive confrontation with authority can be interpreted as representing the condition of non-conformist intellectuals subject to government surveillance.

Many intellectuals – including the journalist Saverio Tutino, who had contributed to the creation of the Cuban myth in Italy, and the Cuban-born writer Italo Calvino – denounced the way Padilla was treated in a second letter published in *Le Monde* on May 22, 1971. This had consequences: Castro accused the signatories of arrogant interference, affirmed that artistic endeavours were subordinate to the need of the Revolution and had their works withdrawn from Cuban libraries.⁵⁸ De Céspedes moved again against the grain and, instead of joining Calvino and Tutino in the protest, translated into Italian and French the statement that Haidée Santamaria, in her capacity of director of *Casa de las Américas*, had written in defence of the Revolution with the aim of obtaining international support for the Cuban government.⁵⁹

As the granddaughter of a revolutionary hero, De Céspedes was welcome in Cuba, but she was also a Cuban citizen who had chosen to live in a capitalist country, a choice that Castro sharply condemned. Moreover, the years spent in the United States during her husband’s appointment at the Italian Embassy in Washington in the 1950s cast a shadow on her biography. She needed to protect the alliances she has made in the country, even at the cost of renouncing to a Cuban translation of her book.

Conclusions

Judith Butler has noted that conventional notions of censorship tend to see it as an action exercised by an individual, or by the state against a less powerful subject, and to separate the

subject who has been censored from the one who censors.⁶⁰ Alba de Céspedes' texts calls into question these distinctions, as the author is not situated outside of the discourses of the Revolution, but occupies a liminal position as an outsider (a cosmopolitan bourgeois, and a Cuban who chose to live in a capitalist country) and insider (the granddaughter of Carlos Manuel de Céspedes). Furthermore, the encounter of this established cosmopolitan Western intellectual with a non-conformist Cuban translator, and the lack of support of the Cuban government, challenge clear cut positions of power, for in this case the censored subject, with characteristic first world confidence, was assertively trying to insert herself into the literary system of a third world country.

Closely related to censorship are issues of translatability, which are in turn connected to questions of comparability. The comparisons that underpin de Céspedes works, while not in line with the politics of neo-liberal societies, were not particularly transgressive from a European perspective, as the historical events in question (i.e. the Cuban revolution and the 1968 movement) were seen as closely connected. However, from the Cuban perspective, only vertical comparisons grounded in the Cuban context, and built on government official rhetoric, were pertinent to the cause of the Revolution. Comparison that went beyond the national context, and that drew attention to shared features between the Cuban Revolution and the Parisian 1968 insurrection, while not necessarily in opposition from an ideological point of view, clashed with national politics and called into questions the primacy and specificity of the Revolution. Moreover, at a time in which Cuba's focus was on fighting neo-liberal imperialism, there was little interest in comparisons in which one term was grounded in a capitalist European country. After the Padilla affair, Castro had not hesitated to cut off relationships with Western intellectuals, calling them 'bourgeois liberals', 'petty agents of cultural colonialism'.⁶¹ If Western intellectuals were still interested in the Cuban Revolution, the Revolution was not necessarily interested in them.

In other words, the transnational comparisons on which de Céspedes built her works were unidirectional, valid from a European perspective only. The history of the production and translation of *Chansons des filles de mai* thus reminds us that comparability and translatability are not only entangled but also contextual, as the judgement of whether common ground between the *comparanda* subsists, and on whether it is legitimate to draw attention to it, depends on the point of view from which the comparison is judged, and is closely related to social and political factors.

¹ I would like to thank Franco Antamoro de Céspedes for granting permission to publish references to archival material. I am grateful to Sabina Ciminari and Iledys González for sharing their knowledge on Alba de Céspedes in the French and Cuban context, and to Penny Morris for first drawing my attention to *Chansons de filles de Mai* and for helping me to find the article on *Epoca*.

² ‘Nakba’, literally ‘catastrophe’, is the term used by Palestinians to describe the foundation of Israel and the subsequent expulsion of Palestinians from Jewish land.

³ See Charlotte Wiedemann, *Den Schmerz der Anderen begreifen. Holocaust und Weltgedächtnis* (Berlin: Propyläen Verlag, 2022) and Bashir Bashir and Amos Goldberg, *The Holocaust and the Nakba: A New Grammar of Trauma and History* (New York: Columbia UP, 2019).

⁴ Hans Monath, ‘“Inakzeptabel und respektlos”: Veranstaltung des Goethe-Instituts sorgt in Israel für Empörung’, *Tagesspiegel*, 10.11.2022, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/empörung-in-israel-uber-goethe-stiftung-inakzeptabel-und-respektlos-8859721.html>

⁵ *Ibid.*, see also Sonia Combe, ‘Peut-on critiquer Israël en Allemagne ?’ *Le monde diplomatique*, April 2023, p. 12.

⁶ Susan Neuman, Introduction to ‘Understanding the Pain of Others. The Holocaust, the Nakba and German Memory Culture,’ 2/2/2023, <https://youtu.be/4bs-JNnCV-k>

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary <https://www.etymonline.com/word/compare>

⁹ Catherine Brown, *The Art of Comparison: How Novels and Critics Compare* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011), p.1

¹⁰ See David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) and Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, translated by Malcolm DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2004).

¹¹ Barbara Cassin defines untranslatability as ‘what one keeps on (not) translating’. See Cassin, ‘Introduction’, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, edited by Barbara Cassin, Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood, translated by Michael Wood (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014), pp. 17-20 (p.70). For Emily Apter’s reflections on

untranslatability as a ‘theoretical fulcrum of comparative literature’ see Emily Apter, ‘Introduction’, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London, New York: Verso, 2013), pp. 1-30 (p. 3).

¹² See the new Italian editions by Mondadori of *Le ragazze di maggio* (2023), *Quaderno proibito* (2022) and *Dalla parte di lei* (2021), as well as the publication of the English translations of *Forgotten Notebook*, translated by Anne Goldstein (New York: Astra, 2023 and London: Pushkin Press, 2023) and *Her Side of the Story*, translated by Jill Foulston, with an afterward by Elena Ferrante (New York: Astra, 2023, also forthcoming with Pushkin Press). De Céspedes’ novels are also being reissued in France and Germany, and new editions/translations are on the way in over 20 countries. This editorial revival rides the wave of Elena Ferrante’s phenomenon, as Ferrante, in *La Frantumaglia* (Roma: e/o, 2003), mentions Alba de Céspedes among the writers who had a great influence on her writing.

¹³ Heberto Padilla to Alba de Céspedes, Havana, October 25, 1970, Mondadori Foundation (henceforth abbreviated as FM), case 90, folder 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Alba de Céspedes, *Io, suo padre* (Lanciano: Carabba, 1935).

¹⁶ Ulla Åkerström, ‘Sambadù, amore negro di Mura. Censura fascista e sfida alla morale nell’Italia di Mussolini’, *Romance Studies*, 36:3 (2018): 101-110 (p. 102).

¹⁷ De Céspedes sometimes claims she had been arrested for taking part in protests against the Abyssinian war; other times, she writes that she had hosted at her house Tullio Giordana, unaware of the fact that he was a notorious anti-fascist. See Marina Zancan, ‘Cronologia’, in *Alba de Céspedes, Romanzi* (Milano, Mondadori, 2011), pp. 65-149 (p.69).

¹⁸ Ulla Åkerström, ‘Revisione dell’opera di Alba de Céspedes nel centenario della nascita,’ in *Atti Del XVIII Congresso Dei Romanisti Scandinavi*, edited by E. Ahlstedt, K. Benson, et al. (Göteborg: Romanica Gothoburgensia), pp. 801–812 (p. 806).

¹⁹ On the editorial history of *Nessuno torna indietro* and on the censorship imposed on the film based on the novel, see Marina Zancan, ‘Nessuno tornata indietro’, in *Alba de Céspedes, Romanzi* (Milano, Mondadori, 2011), pp.1611-1629 (pp. 1619-21).

²⁰ On the history of *Mercurio*, see Laura di Nicola, *Mercurio: storia di una rivista, 1944-1948* (Milan, Mondadori, 2012).

²¹ Alba de Céspedes, Diary entry, September 24, 1957, now in Sabina Ciminari, ‘Alba de Céspedes a Parigi. Fra isolamento, scrittura ed engagement’, *Bollettino di italianistica*, 2. 2 (2005): 33-57 (p. 36). All translations from de Céspedes works into English are my own.

²² The first piece published in French is the short story ‘Une vocation’ (‘A Vocation’), published in *Revue des deux mondes* in 1965 and later self-translated by the author. De Céspedes had previously written only unpublished poems in French.

²³ From 1952 to 1958, Alba de Céspedes held a column in *Epoca* titled *Dalla parte di lei* (From her side), then re-named as *Diario di una scrittrice* (A writer’s diary) from 1958 to 1960. Marina Zancan draws attention to de Céspedes’ support of Castro in this article in ‘Preface’, *Con Gran amor*, by Alba de Céspedes (La Havana: Edición Unión, 2011), p. 17.

²⁴ Alba de Céspedes, ‘La mia buona terra’, *Diario di una scrittrice*, in *Epoca*, 18/01/1959, p. 59. Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

²⁵ Batista, in Italian, means ‘batiste’, and Mussolini is reminiscent of *mussola* (muslin).

²⁶ The text in italics is in Spanish in the article and means ‘the lawyers, the men of letters, the ones who hold degrees’.

²⁷ In the same article, de Céspedes confirms: ‘La rivoluzione a Cuba, è sempre nata dalle classi intellettuali, da ricchi che, per accostarsi al popolo, hanno voluto conoscere la stessa povertà’ (p.59) (The revolution in Cuba has always been started by the intellectual classes, by the wealthy who, in order to become close to the people, wanted to experience poverty).

²⁸ On the claim of the Italian Communist party to build on the heritage of the Resistance, see Anna Baldini, *Il Comunista: Una storia letteraria dalla resistenza agli anni settanta* (Torino: UTET, 2008), p. 25.

²⁹ Iledys González, *Alba de Céspedes en Cuba: Itinerarios de la memoria narrada* (Leiden: Almenada, 2021), p. 64.F

³⁰ González, *Alba de Céspedes en Cuba*, p. 66.

³¹ Alba de Céspedes to Paul Flamand, August 13, 1968, now in Marina Zancan, 'Cronologia', pp. 129-130.

³² Walkowitz defines 'born translated novels' as contemporary works that 'seem to occupy more than one space, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time'. See Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: the Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 6.

³³ See, for example, Nanni Balestrini's best-seller *Vogliamo tutto* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1971), which purports to be the faithful transcription of a worker recalling his participation in the 1969 protests.

³⁴ Alba de Céspedes, back cover, *Chansons des filles de Mai*, éditions du Seuil, 1968.

Subsequent references to this work will be given in the main body of the article.

³⁵ Sabina Ciminari sees the choice of writing in French as dictated by the Parisian setting, and as a tribute by the author to a country in which she felt welcome. See Ciminari, 'Alba de Céspedes a Parigi', in *Atti del convegno: giornate internazionali di studi sulla traduzione*, Vol. II, edited by Vito Percorato (Palermo: Herbita editrice): pp. 75-93, (pp 78-80).

³⁶ Alba de Céspedes to Paul Flamand, August 13, 1968, now in Marina Zancan, 'Cronologia', p. 19-130, p. 130.

³⁷ Sabina Ciminari, 'Una scrittrice engagée. La scelta del '68 nella biografia e nella scrittura di Alba de Céspedes', in *Natura Società Letteraria, Atti del XXII congresso dell'ADI - Associazione degli Italianisti (Bologna, 13-15 settembre 2018)*, edited by A. Campana e F. Giunta (Roma: Adi editore, 2020), p. 8.

³⁸ See Ciminari, 'Una scrittrice engagée', p. 8.

³⁹ See Ciminari, 'Una scrittrice engagée', p. 6.

⁴⁰ See Alba de Céspedes to Paul Flamand, August 13, 1968.

⁴¹ Che Guevara had been killed the previous year in Bolivia.

⁴² This might be why, as Ciminari has suggested, throughout the poems de Céspedes consistently refers to the insurrections as a 'revolution', despite their temporary character and the fact that they did not lead to permanent changes in the French political system. See Ciminari, 'Una scrittrice engagée', p.7.

⁴³ Alba de Céspedes, book jacket of *Le ragazze di Maggio* (Milano: Mondadori, 1970).

⁴⁴ *Nessuno torna indietro* was, however, censored in the Spanish translation because of references to the Spanish civil war. See María Mercedes González de Sande, 'Censura y traducción: el caso de Nadie vuelve atrás, de Alba de Céspedes', *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana* 23 (2016): 237-255.

⁴⁵ For example, the French 'un gars de la crème/du Seizième' (42-44) is rendered in Italian as 'un ragazzo/che abitava nei quartieri/eleganti' ('a guy from elegant neighbourhoods') (43-45); the amphetamine 'Maxiton' (p.146) is rendered in Italian with the less specific 'tubetti di eccitanti' (pouches of exciting substances) (p. 147), but the generic 'voiture' (car) (p. 64) is translated in the Italian text with a more specific *Giulietta*- not by chance an Italian car, as if to enable readers to picture the scene (p. 65). 'Rue Spontini' (p. 52) is changed in the Italian text into 'avenue Poincaré' (p. 53); both are streets of wealthy residents, and the change seems motivated by the fact that the Italian-sounding name of Rue Spontini could generate confusion. Such changes are numerous in the re-writing.

⁴⁶ It is of course possible that the glossary was written with a second French edition (which was never published) in mind.

⁴⁷ See, for example, the term ‘chienlit’ (p.62), translated by the author as ‘pagliacetto’ (p. 63), and defined in the glossary as ‘termine intraducibile (approssimativamente “carnevale, mascherata, pagliacciata”) col quale il generale de Gaulle definì le manifestazioni studentesche’ (‘untranslatable term (approximately “carnival, masquerade, clown”) with which General de Gaulle defined student demonstrations’) (p. 190).

⁴⁸ See Ciminari, ‘Alba de Céspedes a Parigi’, p. 44.

⁴⁹ FM, case 66 folder 11. De Céspedes was planning to use this speech as an epigraph for a novel about Cuba on which she worked intensively in the 1970s. The novel was never published.

⁵⁰ Yledys González, *Cuba, vida y escritura en Alba de Céspedes: Historia de Con gran amor*, PhD thesis, Università degli studi di Roma ‘La Sapienza’, 2017, p. 83.

⁵¹ Luis Quesada, ‘“Fuera del Juego”: A Poet’s Appraisal of the Cuban Revolution’, *Latin American Literary Review*, 3.6 (1975): 89-98 (p.8).

⁵² Antonio Melis, ‘1968: Ritorno a Cuba’, in *Alba de Céspedes*, edited by Marian Zancan (Milano: Mondadori, 2005), pp. 374-382 (p. 378).

⁵³ Alba de Céspedes to Alberto Mondadori, September 7, 1970, now in Gonzales, *Alba de Céspedes en Cuba*, p. 89.

⁵⁴ The attack to the Moncada Barracks took place on July 26, 1953.

⁵⁵ See Ana Covarrubias, ‘Cuba and Mexico: A Case for Mutual Non Intervention’, *Cuban Studies*, 26 (1996), 121-141.

⁵⁶ The number of victims, according to official sources, was 35. It is estimated that 350 demonstrators were killed in Tlatelalco.

⁵⁷ Carlos Aguirre, ‘Cuba’s 1968: Between Revolution and Authoritarianism’, *Lasa Forum*, 49.4 (2018), 14-17 (p. 17).

⁵⁸ James Buckwalter-Arias, James. 2005. ‘Reinscribing the Aesthetic: Cuban Narrative and Post-Soviet Cultural Politics’, *PMLA*, 120.2 (2005), 362-374 (p. 366).

⁵⁹ González, *Alba de Céspedes en Cuba*, pp. 78-85.

⁶⁰ Judith Butler, ‘Ruled Out: Vocabularies of the Censor,’ in *Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation*, ed. by Robert C. Post (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1998) pp. 247-259 (p. 247).

⁶¹ James Buckwalter-Arias, ‘Reinscribing the Aesthetic: Cuban Narrative and Post-Soviet Cultural Politics’, *PMLA*, 120: 2 (2005), pp. 362-374 (p.366).