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Journal

California Italian Studies, 9(1)

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Publication Date

2019

DOI

10.5070/C391042524

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Jewish Refugee Women, Transnational Coalition Politics, and Affect in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri*

Eveljn Ferraro

Writing across and beyond borders evokes at once the human aspiration to connectedness and the reality of a divided world invested in particular interests. For Ebe Cagli Seidenberg, the act of writing emanates from the Fascist “leggi razziali” (“racial laws”) of 1938, which forced her—a young Jewish Italian woman—to leave her native Italy and find refuge in the United States. Her five-volume series entitled *Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato* (*Cycle of the Forced Exile*, 1975-91) is a testament to that unwanted separation and the enormous implications that borders have on processes of self and communal identity, hybridization, and exclusion.¹

The question of how Italy has been made (or imagined to be) borderless is an ongoing preoccupation in Cagli Seidenberg's testimonial writing. The unforeseen racial persecution and the abrupt transition from a sheltered life in Rome to that of a refugee in Baltimore created a fracture—in her terms, “uno strappo nelle radici” (“an uprooting”)—that her writing both reflects and seeks to heal. Cagli Seidenberg's goals to bear witness to racial violence while also reimagining an ordinary existence in the diaspora lie at the center of her narrative approach. In fact, her work both records borders and also affirms the right to a hybrid *Italianità* and multiple belongings. One of the most effective expressions of border-crossing in Cagli Seidenberg's production can be found in the novel *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri* (*The Time of the Dioscuri*, 1980), the second volume of *Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato*, where literary and visual representations are intertextually linked in order to tell the parallel yet divergent stories of Ebe and her brother Corrado Cagli, a noted painter who, after fleeing Italy, joined the U.S. army, only to return to Italy after World War II.² Cagli Seidenberg also eventually returned to Rome, after five decades abroad.

This essay explores the progression from the first two novels of the *Ciclo* (*Le sabbie del silenzio* [*The Sands of Silence*, 1975], and *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*) to the latter volumes, *Gente sul Pacifico* (*People on the Pacific*, 1982), *Quando i santi marceranno. Tre storie d'America* (*When the Saints Go Marching in: Three American Stories*, 1983), and *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri* (*As Guests: Eva and Others*, 1991). In particular, I trace the evolution of family and national ties with Italy into transnational explorations of refugee life in *Come ospiti*. Against a semi-fictional background with only a meager Italian presence, Cagli Seidenberg's anonymous, female, Italian narrator negotiates geographical and cultural displacement from a first-person point of view. I consider both the social and gender politics within the narrative and the ways in which the novel's formal organization (intertextuality, intermediality, and meta-narrative discourses) are in

¹ All English translations of Cagli Seidenberg's Italian texts are mine unless otherwise specified.

² For analyses of these divergent trajectories see Eveljn Ferraro, “Between Italy and America: Exile and Suspension in Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*,” *Carte Italiane: A Journal of Italian Studies*, eds. Sarah A. Carey and Brendan W. Hennessey, 5 (2009): 181-98, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/8z158439>, and ead., “Drawing Testimony, Coming to Writing: Ebe Cagli Seidenberg's *Le sabbie del silenzio* and *Il Tempo dei Dioscuri*,” *NeMLA Italian Studies*, Special Issue: The Jewish Experience in Contemporary Italy, eds. Philip Balma and Simona Wright, 37 (2015): 140-64, <https://www.buffalo.edu/content/dam/www/nemla/NIS/XXXVII/9.NIS-37-2015-FERRARO.pdf>. An enlightening exploration of Corrado Cagli's American years can be found in Raffaele Bedarida, *Corrado Cagli. La pittura, l'esilio, l'America (1938-1947)* (Rome: Donzelli, 2018).

dialogue with each other. The unusual dynamic between political content, on the one hand, and narrative modality, on the other, makes this text an original example of coalition politics in transnational literature.

Come ospiti portrays the life of a small community of European refugees gathered in the hills of Berkeley, California. Rather than being defined by diasporic movement, this novel depicts daily life among a transplanted group of uprooted individuals. Cagli Seidenberg focuses on gender relationships and the cumbersome, even tragic, role of personal pasts and social pressures. The novel's social and gender politics are exposed when the narrator traces her own reactions, and those of other (non-Italian) *ospiti* (guests), to a social framework defined by exclusionary practices. From the outset, the narrator introduces herself through linguistic hybridism as a “‘refugee’ cresciuta a Roma” (“refugee raised in Rome”)³ who reminisces about her arrival in California from the northeastern seaboard with her husband Daniel many years earlier. The narrator is another alter ego of the author, similar to the narrator of *Il Tempo*.⁴

Despite the absence of clear chronological development in *Come ospiti*, the author's biography and cultural references to Karen Gershon's book *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (1966) and the Berkeley Math Sciences Research Institute (founded in 1982), along with the visual integration of Corrado Cagli's dated artwork, suggest that the narrative spans several decades after World War II. The narrator's status as a refugee and wife of a UC Berkeley faculty member mirrors that of her friends Gerda and Eva, two German refugee women whose narratives weave together desire and an attempt to create normalcy in the promising microcosm of the Berkeley hills. These women's commonalities prompt questions such as: What does building a quotidian existence mean for these refugees? How do they interact with each other, and what factors cause the group to coalesce? How does place affect the construction of the ordinary? And how do emotions circulate and encroach on each other in this process?

In discussing cultural autobiography as an “out-law” genre, Caren Kaplan states that coalition politics are undertaken out of necessity, as a means to stay alive, both personally and culturally.⁵ In common usage, “coalition politics” refers to temporary alliances between individuals or groups driven by a common goal. Often it is a clear sense of threat that brings people to enter coalitions. In her feminist commentary on coalition politics in the early 1980s, the Black scholar and civil rights activist Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote: “You don't go into coalition because you just *like* it,” but “because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive.”⁶ Reagon views survival as the grounds for coalition and common political and cross-cultural struggles. For her, coalitions are metaphorically opposed to homes: coalitions contrast with the comfort and illusory unity postulated, for instance, around the experience of being a

³ Ebe Cagli Seidenberg, *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri* (Bologna: Bora, 1996), 9. All further in-text parenthetical citations are to this edition.

⁴ Cagli Seidenberg intentionally blurs autobiography and fiction and draws heavily on her experiences for her novels. Like the narrator of *Come ospiti*, Cagli Seidenberg's husband, Abraham Seidenberg, became a faculty member at UC Berkeley after World War II. He completed a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in 1943. He studied mathematics under the supervision of Oscar Zariski, whose wife Yole was Ebe's sister.

⁵ Caren Kaplan, “Resisting Autobiography: Out-Law Genres and Transnational Feminist Subjects,” in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography*, eds. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 130-32.

⁶ Bernice Johnson Reagon, “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,” in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 242. In the same volume, see also Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay, “Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience,” 254-72, for an analysis of two opposite viewpoints of coalition politics, one that underlines transcendence of difference within universal sisterhood, the other—voiced by Reagon—rooted in engagement with difference, which I adopt here.

woman as a basis for universal sisterhood. Rather than the transcendence of difference, Reagan's approach to coalition engages with difference and the strategic intersections of gender, race, class, age, and other identities at specific historical moments within coalition building.

This strategic engagement with difference, along with Anna Carastathis's intersectional conceptualization of identities as coalitions "constituted by internal as well as external relations of power"⁷ has proved helpful in understanding coalition politics in *Come ospiti*. In the following pages, I employ an intersectional, historicized, and geographically located approach in which coalition politics is critically defined by difference within sameness. I question the notion of coalescing purely on the basis of common denominators such as being female, Jewish, and a victim of persecution. I claim that nationality, class, language, and cultural background, as well as affective belongings and relations of power are all factors that shape the foundations and functions of coalition politics in Cagli Seidenberg's literary world. While the title *Come ospiti: Eva ed altri* evokes the loss of home and thus the potential for coalition, the manner in which coalition building unfolds and reflects discriminatory practices along gender, class, and race lines is the object of my critical investigation.

I map and critique the novel in terms of two kinds of politics—one within the novel's diegesis, which fails to be a model of empowerment for the female characters, and another as intertextual dialogue established in the text, which artistically does work. Several moments in the story relating to Eva and motherhood clearly illustrate gender and class relationships and the destructive effects of silencing and social masking. As a counterpoint to the impermanent female alliances of the story, coalition politics is also articulated through the quest for literary interlocutors across national and linguistic borders. Cagli Seidenberg's pivotal interweaving of Gershon's collective autobiography *We Came as Children* is telling in this regard, as is the author's intangible deployment and reframing of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* in the Berkeley hills.

Gemütlich, Affect, and Refugee Women

The influence of social milieu on transnational alliances is a central theme in *Come ospiti*. In the prose, the German word "gemütlich" describes the warm, congenial atmosphere of Sam and Becky's house in Berkeley: a lit fireplace, a cozy family room, a profusion of plants and flowers, and the pleasant smell of fresh-baked cakes, coupled with the hosts' hospitality, help create a sense of home.⁸ A mezuzah affixed to the door frame and a menorah are signs of the Jewish

⁷ Anna Carastathis, *Intersectionality: Origins, Contestations, Horizons* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), Chapter 5, "Identities as Coalition," 165: "Conceptualizing identities as coalitions—as internally heterogeneous, complex unities constituted by internal as well as external relations of power—enables us to form effective political alliances that cross identity categories and to pursue a liberatory politics of interconnection." Carastathis's reading of Kimberlé Crenshaw has informed my view of intersectionality as a critical tool that undermines the exclusive focus on the differences between groups—and thus the dichotomy between "identity" and "coalition" politics, with the former dependent on sameness and the latter on alliances built across differences—and reveals tensions and relations of subordination within identity-based groups often falsely imagined as homogeneous. The Black legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" in her 1989 essay, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *The University of Chicago Legal Forum* 139 (1989): 139-67, <https://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>, to describe the simultaneous experience of the multiple oppressions faced by Black women.

⁸ The OED defines "Gemütlich" as "Pleasant, cheerful; cosy, snug, homely; genial, good-natured." See *OED Online*, s.v. "gemütlich, adj," accessed December 29, 2018. It should be noted that although nowadays gemütlich is used as

identity that Sam and Becky have inherited from their immigrant parents and proudly pass on to their two children. Their home is also more than just a private nest for the family and friends. Becky regularly organizes dinners and cocktail parties, events that are instrumental to her husband's advancement within the math department at the local, prestigious University of California at Berkeley.

Becky plays a conventional role in the novel. She embodies the matriarch: optimistic, ambitious, and self-confident inside and outside the home, a protective mother and faithful wife. The location of the couple's house is indicative of their social standing. Along with many of Sam's other colleagues, their household lies in the "quartiere 'della gente bene' a nord del Campus" ("upper-class people's neighborhood, North of Campus") (11) in the Berkeley hills, an affluent area with spectacular views of the San Francisco Bay. In this *locus amoenus*, introduced as an earthly paradise, Eva and other displaced individuals like her participate as guests, unable to forge an authentic *gemütlich* atmosphere for themselves and those around them. The displaced narrator recreates that social world where people, like syllables, reverberate against each other and struggle to come together,

[II] mondo da riprodurre balbettando
nel quale io come ospite
avrò soggiornato

(The to-be-restuttered world / whose guest I / will have been)

as Paul Celan's verses exemplify in the novel's epigraph.⁹ More specifically, the depiction of social and geographical space is entrusted to a first-person, homodiegetic narrator, who establishes a strategic connection between the narrative and the meta-narrative, that is, between what happens to the characters in the novel and the concurrent imaginary conversation that the narrator carries on. She narrates as a reader who records her own reactions in the story that we read. Her complex role also incorporates multiple Jewish voices from Gershon's collective autobiography, which is dialogically placed within *Come ospiti* (and to which I will return later). This intermediary role makes the narrator relevant to the novel's coalition politics on the diegetic and extradiegetic levels. As a female refugee character in exile, the narrator is directly enmeshed in the novel's social and gender politics, acting as a participant in the very coalition work that she recounts. She thus occupies the privileged position of the ultimate storyteller, who organizes the subject matter and relates everyone's stories from her point of view.

a positive adjective to describe objects, in its original meaning, *gemütlich* is not an absolute or inherent quality of an object or situation, but it rather describes whether something accords to one's "gemüt," i.e., one's disposition or nature. In brief, it explains a relationship between what is internal and external. On this and further distinctions see the online forum, <https://german.stackexchange.com/questions/44217/gem%C3%BCtlich-vs-behaglich>. I consider this relational aspect of *gemütlich* key in Cagli Seidenberg's text.

⁹ "Die nachzustotternde Welt, / bei der ich zu Gast / gewesen sein werde." The epigraph includes the original poem in German (*Die nachzustotternde Welt*) and the Italian translation (from *Luce coatta*, trans. Giuseppe Bevilacqua [Milan: Mondadori, 1983]). For the English translation and commentary, see Paul Celan, *Breathturn into Timestead: The Collected Later Poetry, a Bilingual Edition*, trans. Pierre Joris (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014), 334-35 and 582. One possible interpretation that resonates with Cagli Seidenberg's intertextual and intermedial aesthetic emphasizes the work of the poem as a restuttering of the world—a recreation rather than a mimetic reproduction—achieved through the decomposition of language into syllables or meaning-carrying units and their rearrangement into a language that re-says the world as a place of passage where one is invited as a guest for a limited time.

As the title of the novel suggests, Eva's tragic story lies at the heart of the narrative, while the narrator's figure may as a result remain a bit elusive, mainly because of her self-positioning as a "silent guest" within the community that she portrays. The narrator, Eva, Gerda, and the Chinese woman, Ying, are all deracinated women married to math professors, struggling for a sense of belonging and home in a foreign country. The narrator particularly empathizes with Eva, who is constructed relationally and antithetically to Gerda, while Ying remains a secondary figure, acting as a friend to Gerda. In comparison to Gerda's and Eva's eccentricity, Ying and the narrator exhibit a similar self-positioning as silent guests who tend to suppress their emotions in social settings. The novel provides sparse references to the narrator's diasporic experience as a victim of racial persecution in Italy and a refugee in the United States. Rather than producing a factual, coherent story of her existence, the narrator of this novel echoes the detailed diasporic narratives of the first volumes of the *Cycle* by alter egos of the author. In *Come ospiti*, instead, the narrator's exploration focuses on her identity as a refugee and what it means to rebuild a "normal" life from diverse backgrounds. The term "refugee" often appears in English from the opening pages of the text in order to signal both the narrator's identity and her dissatisfaction with conventional associations. A portrait of her complex psychology emerges; for instance, in her move from clear self-description as a Roman refugee to her association with Daniel as a Berkeley home-owner, we see an attempt to resolve her interior conflicts. She buys a house and secures a teaching position at a local school out of desire to overcome her internal negativity—what she expresses in the hybrid phrase "angosce di refugee" ("refugee angst") (14). This communicative impasse, in which the narrator grapples with her own silence, coincides with her new interest in diaries, and the search for answers about refugee identities in Gershon's *We Came as Children*. The weaving of the narrative and the meta-narrative levels is thus established early on around themes of survival, rebuilding, and belonging. In recording her reactions to the voices of the former Jewish refugee children interviewed by Gershon, the narrator engages with her past and its wounds. We learn, for instance, of her decision to not have children because she fears that, unlike her parents, she may not be able to protect them and offer them a decent, "normal" life. The memory of parental figures also illuminates the narrator's relationship to her Jewish identity, an awareness that was less vital to her education in Italy. Pressed by Becky on this subject, she replies, "Non mi sentivo diversa dai miei connazionali. Un senso d'identità non s'improvvisa" ("I didn't feel different from my fellow Italians. You cannot make up a sense of identity") (34). For her, "l'essere una refugee" ("being a refugee") cannot be a defining factor of "identità," as the term "refugee" is an entirely negative concept (34).

Although involved in many social activities, it is evident throughout the novel that the narrator's openness to the others' confidences is not matched by her ability to share her own experiences. Her move to California seems to have reinforced her realization that "era la vita a impormi il mio destino, che non potevo scegliere nulla, né il luogo in cui volevo vivere, né la gente con cui volevo stare, neppure la lingua in cui avrei voluto esprimermi" ("life had decided my destiny, I could not choose anything, neither the place where I wanted to live, nor the people that I wanted to have around, or the language in which I would have liked to express myself") (123). As a result of this internal decision, she imposes a "silenzio obbligato" ("compulsory silence") on herself, echoing the "esilio obbligato" of the cycle's title that underlies both "l'apparenza di una vita normale" ("the appearance of a normal life") (123) and the desire of "un senso di normalità" ("a sense of normalcy") (208) that dominates the novel. From this multi-faceted, liminal position, the narrator empathizes with a variety of emotions and experiences

endured by other uprooted persons, the means that they employ to forge an “ordinary” life, and the extent to which they succeed in reaching their goals.

To evoke Reagon, in a sense, Cagli Seidenberg’s isolation of the Italian narrator within a group of fellow Jewish refugees creates the vivid enactment of coalition politics grounded in survival, where individuals must coalesce in order to stay alive. From this perspective, *Come ospiti* links memoiristic narrative, intertextual reflections, and plural communities in ways that mirror Cagli Seidenberg’s transnational poetics of exclusion, intersectionality, and multiple belongings. In the novel, gender roles are clearly defined by the expectation that women support their male partners’ professional goals through social activities and housekeeping. However, rather than being the author’s primary concern per se, gender roles are scrutinized in relation to key aspects of diasporic identities such as cultural and affective belonging, as well as discrimination along class and racial lines.

Notions of affect and multiple belonging particularly inform this study, as they are intimately connected with borders, allegiances, and agency. The construction of an “ordinary” life by people who inhabit a condition of “extraordinary” exclusion in *Come ospiti* resonates with the concepts of the ordinary, affect, and belonging that Graziella Parati elaborates in *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy: Proximities and Affect in Literature and Film*. Parati’s work is especially applicable with regard to cultural representations of and by refugees, migrants, and children of immigrants. Drawing on various theories of affect, she states: “The construction of what is ‘ordinary’ is steeped in the structuring of an everyday, even a political everyday, that is steeped in affect. The ordinary is the familiar, and the familiar relies on emotions for its existence.”¹⁰ Echoing Sarah Ahmed’s definition of emotion as “the feeling of bodily change,”¹¹ Parati reminds us that emotions circulate in and involve body and mind; they are subjective but participate in “affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation.”¹² She argues that complex storytelling, such as that produced by migrants, refugees, and children of migrants, has the power to perform re-mappings of being in place and out of place in order to destabilize notions of belonging.¹³ New allegiances, proximities, and spaces emerge in telling stories of the everyday and attendant processes of belonging where “belongings are always to be conceived in the plural and as non-static allegiances that can be temporary and are affected by change.”¹⁴ I concur with Parati’s claim that affective belongings are central to the field of literary studies, as these emphasize the ability of single agents to establish allegiances with a plurality of communities.¹⁵ In the novel, the narrator

¹⁰ Graziella Parati, *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy: Proximities and Affect in Literature and Film* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9. On the politics of affect in relation to migrant bodies and visibility in the Southern European borderscape, see *Border Lampedusa: Subjectivity, Visibility and Memory in Stories of Sea and Land*, eds. Gabriele Proglia and Laura Odasso (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), particularly Chiara Giubilaro, “(Un)Framing Lampedusa: Regimes of Visibility and the Politics of Affect in Italian Media Representations,” 103-17, in which Giubilaro analyzes dominant media’s framing of migrant bodies (relying on Judith Butler’s notion of “frames”) and calls for the viewers’ affective and ethical involvement towards those bodies and their representations.

¹¹ Sarah Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 5. Cited in Parati, *Migrant Writers*, 9.

¹² Ahmed, *Cultural Politics*, 8 (cited in Parati, *Migrant Writers*, 9).

¹³ Parati, *Migrant Writers*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ Parati terms this ability the “situatedness of singularities in proximities” (*ibid.*, 13). In analyzing spaces through narratives of urban locations, Parati talks about “proximity” to underline both agency and enabling, and “context” to also include the constrictions implied in the sociological definition of space. She prefers to utilize “proximities” to

presents alliances formed between characters at the diegetic level—alliances that are destined to fail—whereas at the meta-level, she points to more inclusive and transformative ways in which people, stories, and emotions circulate. This type of strategy has been described by Parati in her discussion of “proximity” to underline agency and enabling, as opposed to “context,” which includes the constrictions of socially defined spaces.¹⁶

As noted above, the provocations of belonging and identity explored in *Come ospiti* rest on the narrator’s *silenzio obbligato* that relates directly to the entanglements of her own identity. This includes her identification as a Jewish Italian woman, with an upbringing disengaged from a Jewish education, and a sudden experience of expulsion and exile to America. Unlike Becky, or any of the other Jewish women and men surrounding her, she was never taught the principles and practices of the Jewish faith, having being raised in an assimilated family. The circumscription of the narrator’s life before 1938 is essential to understanding the nature of her silence compared to that of other characters. Contrary to Gerda and Eva, who suppress their painful early memories in Europe, the narrator chooses to remember her comfortable lifestyle in Rome prior to the racial laws and to recreate this sense of normalcy in the Berkeley hills. In my view, her formulations are reminiscent of classical literary devices, namely Boccaccio’s framing techniques, which Cagli Seidenberg analyzed in her 1943 doctoral dissertation (to which I will refer later). Since the narrator of *Come ospiti* is not subject to the same degree of persecution that Eva and Gerda experienced, she is empowered to share memories that would otherwise be lost for the refugee community. This laborious work of excavation is conveyed textually by narrating social interactions with other characters, punctuated by her own personal memories. For instance, her only memory of the temple in Rome is a trip with her mother for the wedding of a distant relative (and practicing Jew), Anna. This digging of “la vita di prima” (“the life before”) in Rome does not carry any negative connotation. But as she relays Anna’s story of persecution, separation from husband and daughter, and violent death in Israel, her nightmares resurface through the motif of the lonely tombstone that she has never seen and nevertheless cannot forget (21). Diegetically, this story is framed as an internal monologue that expresses apprehension for the tragedy of a survivor, learned during the narrator’s visit to Italy after the war (19). Her *silenzio obbligato* begins concurrently with this period. This is just one example of her *angosce di refugee*; her difficulty in communicating many aspects of her past to Daniel, a protective husband and the son of Jewish Russian immigrants, who has never been to Europe. Lacking that connection, she acknowledges: “Quindi anche tra me e lui c’era una zona di silenzio” (“Therefore also between him and me there was a zone of silence”) (14).

The women’s common European origin is used in the text as a strategy to construct and question belonging and coalition politics. Within the microcosm of the Berkeley hills, national

move away from dichotomies and grant narratives “the chance to explore the innumerable ways in which people come together in spaces and places [...] It is by using the tools of storytelling that emotions circulate in relational proximities which, in turn, are able to transform the impermanence of feelings and emotions into transformative force. The situatedness of singularities in proximities plays an important role in defining the plurality of belongings that define individuals” (ibid.). On the notion of “situatedness” and its theoretical development, see Donna J. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1990), 183-201; and Marcel Stoezler and Nira Yuval-Davis, “Standpoint Theory, Situated Knowledge and the Situated Imagination,” *Feminist Theory* 3, no. 3 (December 2002): 315-33. The latter emphasizes the imaginary side (in relation to the cognitive side) of the process of mental negotiation between individual and social experience. Like knowledge, also imagination is “situated.” It is affected by the “positioning of our gaze” but also gives specific meanings to our experiences and concepts.

¹⁶ In *Come ospiti*, the constrictions of context are best exemplified by the stories of Eva and the other guests.

and ethnic affiliations are complicated by individual stories that reflect affective investment in that surrounding world. For instance, after her move to California, the narrator participates in a banal conversation in Italian with a group of Italian American and Italophile women on the remarkable changes that Fascism exerted on Italian men's appearance—"sembravano tutti più belli, atletici e sportivi. [...] Mussolini [...] aveva capito quanto giovassero lo sport e la ginnastica" ("they looked more handsome, athletic and sporty. [...] Mussolini [...] had understood the value of sports and gymnastics") (14). These opinions convince the narrator to stay away from the Italian section of the Ladies' Faculty Club of the University of California at Berkeley.¹⁷ Caught between feelings of belonging and alienation, she recedes into a silence that reinforces her role of listener and witness.

Her forceful displacement makes her attractive to men and women with traumatic pasts. For example, French refugee Pierre L. is introduced as the perfect embodiment of the "outsider," a concentration camp survivor and exceptional mathematician with a solitary destiny. His ambiguous yet intimate approach to the narrator prompts her defensiveness, a common and complex index of relations among refugees. While we might expect empathy between the two refugees who converse in French, her reaction counters the expectation that shared modes of communication dissipate feelings of alienation. It is more so the confidences of women such as Gerda and Eva—women with whom she must communicate in a language foreign to all three of them—that allow the narrator to examine her social fabric. Like their Italian counterpart, Gerda and Eva strive to put down roots in their new environment. In order to create normalcy in a physical home in the Berkeley hills, they also need to build positive family and social ties to help them overcome the weight of their pasts. Although partly constructed in opposition to each other, both Gerda's anxious personality and Eva's confident attitude originate in their traumatic childhoods, which contrast with the narrator's sheltered life in Rome. The intersecting stories of these women as Jewish refugees epitomize a form of coalition politics that is rooted in survival and common struggles, but does not lead to women's empowerment in the personal or social spheres. If the frequent result of coalition politics is agency and enabling, the narrative of *Come ospiti* typifies a failed attempt at coalition politics, or to borrow from Parati, it highlights how internal power relations and the constraints of social contexts can overcome the possibilities of agency couched in relational proximities. In comparing Gerda's and Eva's trajectories, I also contend that the most virulent social constraints that prevent coalition politics from succeeding have to do with gender, class, and race lines, and the different ways in which these two women engage with these categories.

Married to Sig, also a refugee from Berlin, and mother of Sheila and Carl, Gerda carries with her the fears of the adolescent who lost her father to a concentration camp, boarded a train filled with Nazis, alone, to reach her mother in Paris, and wandered with her from hotel to hotel even after they made it safely to New York. As she explains, "l'atmosfera dell'albergo per me significa paura, disorientamento. Mi tornerebbe quel vuoto nello stomaco da colmare con qualsiasi cosa" ("the hotel environment means fear [and] disorientation to me. It would bring back hunger pangs that I'd placate by any means") (52), alluding to the eating disorders that Gerda developed during her forced relocations as a young person, her struggle to lose weight and her insecurity around her body. Indeed, when a doctor urges Gerda to undergo a deeper medical examination, possibly suspecting breast cancer, she suffers an emotional breakdown that results

¹⁷ UC Berkeley still features an organization called The Women's Faculty Club, founded in 1919, (<http://www.womensfacultyclub.com/>) as well as The University Section club (<https://sectionclub.berkeley.edu/>), a registered non-profit founded in 1927 that also includes a lively Italian Section.

in putting aside her “good act” (65) and seeking alliances. It is at this moment of vulnerability that coalition politics emerge out of necessity. Himself traumatized at a young age by the death of his mother, Sig cannot cope with Gerda’s hypochondriac behavior. He is unable to offer the safety and protection that he himself lacks. Gerda thus seeks protection in what embodies the quality of *gemütlich* to her, the friendly, reassuring home of Becky and Sam, and Sam himself, who becomes her lover-protector. Becky and the narrator support Gerda in her everyday life during her emotional crisis, but their relationships remain fragile. When Gerda’s confidences intensify and she attempts to involve the narrator in her family lies, the narrator refuses to listen and sadly acknowledges the end of her friendship with Gerda. It is a grave loss because it shatters her belief “che potesse esistere una famiglia armoniosa creata da gente traumatizzata come me” (“that traumatized people like me could form harmonious families”) (82).

If, through Gerda, the narrative highlights coalition work as a circumstantial tactic useful to stay alive, the intersectional complexity of gender, national, racial, and class affiliations in the definition of allegiances and power relations becomes clear as the figure of Eva Stein emerges in the second half of the novel. The first encounter between the narrator and Eva takes place during a party at Becky’s home, and exposes the main intertextual mechanism at work in the novel. When Eva introduces herself as part of the “gruppo di diecimila bambini ebrei cui dette rifugio l’Inghilterra” (“group of ten thousand Jewish children who found refuge in England”) (108), the narrator promptly cites *We Came as Children* to express her familiarity with the topic and connect with Eva. Additionally, her quotation of Gershon’s poem, “The Children’s Exodus,”¹⁸ serves as a device to elicit Eva’s account of her story, although Eva makes clear her desire to suppress the past and construct normalcy through marriage and motherhood. In one of her first confidences to the narrator, Eva openly describes Robin, her second American husband, as part of her plan to create an “ordinary life” (115) in America, in opposition to her traumatic life in Europe, where she lost her mother at birth and her father and adoptive mother to racial persecution. At Dovercourt, an uncompassionate aunt received the fifteen-year-old German refugee, and that experience influenced Eva’s decision to leave England and become completely invested in a project of social mobility through marriage. Her plan seems to come to fruition with the birth of her daughter Dawn when she is in her early forties.

In the social fabric of the novel, Eva’s character is also defined through class and racial relationships that signal a strategic engagement with difference. Eva Stein comes from a more modest, middle-class, Jewish German family, in comparison to Gerda and Sig, who were raised in professional family environments. Her different class origins and cultural background reveal an internal fragmentation within the refugee group that is reflected in the subtle tension between Gerda and Eva. More than to her exuberant fellow national, Gerda is drawn to Ying’s self-disciplined nature, which in turn intimidates the “Mediterranean” narrator. Very little transpires in the novel about Ying’s past, but her emotional connection to the Jewish refugees and her chronic physical pain, seemingly caused by her exile,¹⁹ hint at another cross-cultural alliance in *Come ospiti*’s coalition work. Despite the class differences, both Gerda and Eva envision in their

¹⁸ Gershon’s poem is quoted in English and Italian in the novel. The English version reads: “People at Dovercourt were gay / as if they thought we could forget / our homes in alien play / as if we were not German Jews / but mealtimes were a market-place / where sudden visitors could choose, / although we were not orphaned yet, / a son or daughter by their face” (108).

¹⁹ During a conversation with the narrator at the party in honor of Robin following Eva’s homicide-suicide, Ying draws a parallel between the origins of Eva’s trauma, the Nazis, and her own exile due to the Japanese (“Sto qui per via dei giapponesi” [“I’m here because of the Japanese”] [203]). However, this past is never engaged with in the novel.

daughters a second chance to live their own childhood and adolescence, although their approach to motherhood and parenting is significantly different. Gerda manages to keep a family together, even if through lies, while Eva's story turns instead into tragedy. The author skillfully draws together three elements leading to this tragic outcome: Eva's haunting past, her divorce from Robin, and her overprotective attitude towards her six-year-old daughter—supposedly a symbol of the beginning of a new life, as Dawn's name suggests. In the narrative, Eva's role of wife to a younger, ambitious WASP, the mathematician Robin Davies,²⁰ seems at first to supersede her past of persecution and modest origins. In their plush, modern home in the hills, she lavishes attention on her daughter Dawn with American stories and songs that deliberately exclude references to her past (“*Il mio passato non deve toccarla*” [“My past must not touch her”] [118]). This motherly attention runs parallel to an emotional disengagement between Eva and Robin, who eventually divorces her to marry his American secretary, Lauren. Eva's confidences to her female friends, and especially to the narrator, speak of her extreme marginalization, as she is pushed out of the physical and social boundaries of the Berkeley hills. Moreover, Dawn's increasing affection towards her father and disaffection towards her mother is an emotional loss for Eva, emblematically embodied by the now-empty hammock—a beloved symbol of mother-daughter connection—in the house that Eva later rents in a desperate attempt to still provide a safe and nurturing place for Dawn. When the fear of losing custody of Dawn overcomes Eva, she can no longer contain her feeling of nausea towards life and commits a horrific act, taking Dawn's life and her own.

The tragic epilogue of Eva's story is thematically connected with racial persecution, abruptly introduced in the text through the juxtaposition of two voices—an external narrator reconstructs Eva's spiraling crisis in the present tense while incorporating Eva's own voice in the first-person as recorded in a series of notes that she wrote upon her therapist's recommendation and that she burns during her last night. A whirlwind of thoughts and nightmares are pieced together in these notes, in which past and present merge into grotesque hallucinations: Robin and Lauren become the “*coppietta ariana*” (“Aryan couple”) with fair complexioned faces that turn into “*maschere implacabili*” (“merciless masks”) of persecution (187); Eva is again a caged animal like she was in Dovercourt, and the words of her stepmother “*Hab keine angst!*” (“Do not be afraid!”) (191) that summoned her to be strong at the beginning of her exile now summon her to bring life to a close for her and Dawn. A defeated refugee, Eva unapologetically writes, “*Quante volte un essere umano può ricominciare?*” (“How many times can a human being start anew?”) (188). The loudness of Eva's scream strikingly contrasts with the conspiracy of silence that enshrouds her death in the community. After several pages in which the narrative climax relies on an external voice, the Italian narrator resumes her role of Eva's friend and ally. Artfully constructed, her temporary absence from the social stage due to a seasonal flu simultaneously suggests the narrator's difficulty of relating in the first-person the failure of coalition and empowers her to comment on the group's silence and lack of compassion towards Eva. A

²⁰ It is worth noting Eva's remark about her name: “[Becky and Sam] pensano che abbia sposato Robin perché voglio cancellare le mie origini assumendo il suo cognome, che voglio ‘passare’ come si dice qui per quei negri di sangue misto che, potendo sembrare bianchi, fanno finta di esserlo” (“[Becky and Sam] think that I married Robin because I want to erase my origins by taking on his last name, that I want to ‘pass’ as they say here for those negroes of mixed blood who, being able to look white, pretend to be so”) (129). Eva brings up name changing and “passing,” practices that are not uncommon within the Italian American community to overcome racial discrimination and gain social recognition. These practices have also been adopted as literary strategies to explore immigration to Italy, for instance, by Amara Lakhous.

memorial service in the local Protestant church that Robin and Lauren attend marks the final separation between daughter and mother; Eva's burial site remains unknown, triggering in the narrator another dream of her relative Anna through whom she vicariously says Kaddish for Eva. The local community condemns Eva as a criminal and purposely forgets her in order to quickly resume its customary, academic social life. Within it, power relations are ultimately exposed with Becky's party in celebration of Eva's former husband Robin, who is appointed Director of the new Math Sciences Research Institute.

The reverberations of Eva's tragic story in the text are multiple and help clarify the authorial viewpoint in three overlapping fields: society, ethics, and aesthetics. First, both American society at large and the microstructure of the Berkeley hills are put under scrutiny through Eva. When her status shifts from a professor's spouse to an unemployed divorcee, she loses, among other things, her health insurance, which makes her feel like a "pariah." "Che paese duro è questo, sotto l'apparenza tanto munifica, per i divorziati, i disoccupati, i vecchi, insomma per tutti quelli che stanno al margine. E l'efficienza [sic] burocratica con cui ti tolgono i privilegi!" ("What a harsh country, under the munificent appearance, for those who are divorced, unemployed, the elderly, in brief, for all those who live at the margins. And how efficient the bureaucracy when it comes to taking away your privileges!") (164). An analogous practice of marginalization regulates social relations in the small academic community nestled in the Berkeley hills. The creeping fakeness that underlies appearances is best exemplified by cocktail parties, dinners, open houses, and other social activities constantly depicted as *mise en scènes* or masquerades. At these events, everyone, willingly or not, puts on a mask and shapes a character for themselves, keeping conversations as impersonal as possible. With subtle irony, the narrator explains the origin of her own feeling of emptiness:

Ero sempre stata socievole e la gente m'interessava. Ma alle cene, sempre almeno per otto, era difficile fare una conversazione. Si tenevano a tavola discorsi su argomenti innocui: il tempo, cosa fioriva in giardino, quanta fatica innaffiarlo [...]. Le donne scambiavano qualche ricetta, chiedevano notizie dei bambini; anche i cani e i gatti erano molto importanti. [...] "No shop talk at the table!" Era un parlare che diventava una fuga dal parlare: ecco perché non eravamo mai meno di otto.

[...]

Avevo concluso: c'incontriamo per non incontrarci. Se questo era il modus vivendi dovevo accettarlo, dato che non amo impormi.

Ma ero una mite ribelle: l'accettavo a modo mio, cioè parlando poco. Chissà quante persone avranno pensato di me: è gentile, ma con lei non si sa di cosa parlare: non ha figli, neppure un cane o un gatto. Non sa nemmeno giocare a bridge. (12-13)

(I had always been sociable and interested in people. But at dinner parties, always for eight at least, it was difficult to hold a conversation. Innocuous topics were brought up at the table: the weather, what was blooming in the garden, how much hard work to water it [...]. The women would exchange some recipes, would ask about the children; even the dogs and cats were very important. [...] "No shop talk at the table!" It was a talk that turned into an escape from talking: that is why we were never less than eight. [...] I had concluded: we meet not to meet. If this

was the *modus vivendi* I had to accept it, given that I do not like to assert myself. But I was a quiet rebel: I accepted it my way, which is, by not speaking much. Who knows how many people must have thought of me: she is nice, but with her there is not much to talk about: she has no children, not even a dog or a cat. She cannot even play bridge.)

The concern for appearances, the *bella figura* typically considered a staple of Italian social relations, fades away only when serious problems threaten the fragile affective balance of people like Gerda and Eva. At these moments of crisis, masks come off, temporary alliances are forged, and private confidences take place off stage.

Social masking is also reflected in the local landscape. If the artificiality of modern houses is recorded as a disturbing element in the first pages, by the end of the novel, the background of the Berkeley hills loses its “parvenza d’un paradiso terrestre o quella placida d’un limbo” (“appearance of earthly paradise or a placid limbo”) (11). It takes on a sinister look, amplified by the thick fog that wraps the area as in a mortal grip, and by the grasping horns that reach out from the bay, like human wailing. “Non hai visto quanto mi sono sforzata prima di capire finalmente che non si può?” (“Didn’t you see how hard I tried before I eventually realized that it is not possible?”) (208), Eva’s ghost scoffs at the narrator, who still finds protection from the fog and death through her husband in a house that is nothing but “una falsa isola di pace” (“a false island of peace”). The narrator’s last words, “ancora cerco di vivere come se... come se” (“I still try to live as if... as if”) (208), leave the novel suspended, much like her attempt to fashion a sense of normalcy.

Diegetically, *Come ospiti* echoes models of coalition politics grounded in survival and temporary alliances, while it also explores group identities intersectionally, as coalitions featuring internal fragmentation and tensions. The historical and transnational nature of Cagli Seidenberg’s novel makes the analysis of coalition building in this literary work even more relevant, as it helps clarify the role of racial oppression in the construction of alliances and ordinary life in the diaspora. The development of the narrative suggests that historical trauma, in conjunction with a social scene dominated by feelings and mechanisms of individualistic interest, hampers the work of coalition building. Consequently, within a marginalizing social context, coalition politics undertaken out of necessity among traumatized minorities remain ephemeral, unable to solidify into lasting, empowering, horizontal allegiances.²¹ Eva’s story represents the extreme case of exclusion of the most vulnerable subjects; however, the failure of coalition politics also involves the narrator and the other “guests” who stay physically alive but still struggle to forge normalcy. Furthermore, in *Come ospiti* the author weaves together diegetic and meta-diegetic coalition politics that evince her reconfiguration of Italian cultural roots in the diaspora.

²¹ This notion of horizontal rapports among marginalized subjects evokes Lionnet and Shih’s theorization of “minor transnationalism;” see the introductory essay, “Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally,” in *Minor Transnationalism*, eds. Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1-23. Looking sideways and “linking spaces and struggles laterally” (3) rather than framing them only vertically can unravel any buoyant optimism when we think of minority subjects interacting with each other, as shown by the fact that the transnational allegiances theorized in *Minor Transnationalism* are not fruitfully at work in *Come ospiti*.

Writing and Reading across Borders

In connection with, and possibly as a counterpoint to, the impermanence of female solidarity in the novel, it can be argued that for Cagli Seidenberg it was vital to establish allegiances hinged upon literary conversations across national and linguistic borders. In a world where the refugee *ospite* scrambles to keep the past at bay and forge an ordinary present, developing an imaginary dialogue with literary interlocutors may fulfill a personal need for self-reflection and serve the purpose of sharing with an audience the story of becoming a persecuted other. For the author, destabilizing concepts of belonging and establishing plural allegiances reflected her existential fight against what Parati terms “the dangerous alienation that can emerge in the isolation of difference.”²² Within the refugee community depicted in *Come ospiti*, the liminality of the Italian narrator holds up a mirror to that of the author, and resonates with the isolation that many Italian Jews experienced either in the concentration camps or as refugees outside of Italy, because they were perceived as different.²³ In her seminal study of Italian women writers, *Forging Shoah Memories*, Stefania Lucamante stresses the “double trauma” of Jewish Italian women: “These were Western Jews: they did not live in ghettos, did not speak Yiddish, and in everybody’s mind, came from a nation that was allied with Hitler’s Germany.”²⁴ If respect for emotion formed the basis of a sisterhood or an affective community among the prisoners, membership in a different social class, life style, language, and especially Italian nationality deepened the differences between Italian women and the other prisoners.

Along with lacking the most rudimentary elements of a Jewish education, the decision not to become a mother sets the narrator of *Come ospiti* apart from Gerda and Eva. Motherhood is central to the ethical and aesthetic issues tackled in the novel and is, as I suggest above, directly related to the struggle for an ordinary existence. Paradoxically, the name-bearer of the archetypal mother gives life and takes it back along with hers, because she cannot protect either herself or

²² Parati, *Migrant Writers*, 3.

²³ See the important recent contribution of Shira Klein, *Italy’s Jews from Emancipation to Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), especially Chapter 5, “Imagining Italy: Italian Jewish Refugees in the United States,” 131-55. On the anti-Semitism of Italian Americans during the fascist era, see Stefano Luconi, *La faglia dell’antisemitismo: italiani ed ebrei negli Stati Uniti, 1920-1941* (Viterbo: Sette Città, 2007), while in “Migranti, esiliate o rifugiate?” Alessandra Gissi examines the Jewish Italian women’s participation in the post-1938 “intellectual wave” migration to the United States. She recalls how Laura Capon Fermi, Enrico Fermi’s wife, dealt with the linguistic debate around terms such as “immigrants,” “exiles,” and “refugees” by titling her volume on the intellectual migration from Europe *Illustrious Immigrants: The Intellectual Migration from Europe, 1930-41* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). See Alessandra Gissi, “Migranti, esiliate o rifugiate? Le italiane nell’‘intellectual wave’ (Italia-Stati Uniti, 1938-1943),” in *Lontane da casa: donne italiane e diaspora globale dall’inizio del Novecento a oggi*, eds. Stefano Luconi and Mario Varricchio (Turin: Accademia University Press, 2015), 97-113, <https://books.openedition.org/aaccademia/895?lang=en>.

²⁴ Stefania Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories: Italian Women Writers, Jewish Identity, and The Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 61. Lucamante tasks herself with defining a possible taxonomy of Italian women’s literary representations of the Shoah and filling what she calls “the Italian Jewish women writers’ gap” by “positioning female Italian writers within a comprehensive and international mapping of Shoah studies” (41). Based on her classification, we could define *Come ospiti* as an example of exodus novel, that is, a subgenre of the Italian Shoah novel, itself a juxtaposition of at least two genres, the historical novel and the psychological one (ibid.). Among those who have contributed to the emergence of the exodus novel, Lucamante includes writer and actress Neda Naldi (also known as Talia Volpiana) and Angela Bianchini. The latter’s 1991 novel *Capo d’Europa (The Edge of Europe)* (Milan: Camunia, 1991) tells the story of a young Jewish refugee in Lisbon on her way to the United States. This story resonates with Bianchini’s experience but also with Cagli Seidenberg’s. Cagli Seidenberg left for Baltimore three years earlier than Bianchini, in 1938, and both completed a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University, Cagli in Romance Languages, and Bianchini in French Linguistics.

her daughter from the weight of her past. The fundamental question that the novel poses about motherhood is: How can a woman possibly grant protection to her offspring when that feeling of safety has been denied to her? On this issue, the narrator holds a position distinct from that held by the other women: “Avevo il diritto di dar vita a una creatura che forse non avrei potuto aiutare? [...] quell’essere ancora non nato, avevo voluto proteggerlo prima di concepirlo” (“Did I have the right to give birth to a creature that I might not have been able to help? [...] I wanted to protect that being not yet born even before conceiving it”) (17). As in previous works (e.g., *Le sabbie del silenzio*), protection is inconceivable for the refugee; the narrator bases her decision not to have children on the fear that history may repeat itself, as an act of personal responsibility. Notably, the narrator’s speculations on motherhood and the refugee condition spring from the book *We Came as Children*, edited by Karen Gershon, a German-born British writer and one of the ten thousand Jewish children who arrived as refugees in Britain before World War II. In the volume, Gershon gathered two hundred and thirty-four contributions of former child refugees. The narrator of *Come ospiti* establishes an intimate dialogue with this choral text and shares with the voices that rise from it “il senso d’una ferita che non si rimargina” (“the sense of a wound that cannot heal”) (16). At the same time, she finds fault with its lack of a unified subject behind the multiplicity of scattered voices.

Besides adding an essayistic quality to the novel, the prominence of *We Came as Children* throughout *Come ospiti* sheds light on some crucial aspects of Cagli Seidenberg’s literary operation, which in my view points to a transnational model. The narrator’s commentary clarifies the type of literary project that the author accomplishes in the last novel of *Ciclo*, and the cycle at large, read as an intertext or *terragraphica*—that is, the writer’s textualized place or “country” from which she positions herself, to use H el ene Cixous’s words.²⁵ Such a project has a testimonial value, like Gershon’s, but it employs the autobiographical novel rather than the ethnographic report as an alternative “out-law” genre. Time urged Gershon “to collect what material [she] could before it was too late,”²⁶ whereas personal and social negotiations, as well as a gendered rewriting of historical events, emerge as Cagli Seidenberg’s main preoccupation in *Come ospiti*. Therefore, she explored the situatedness—the multifaceted, shifting, practical relationships developing in a specific context—of a group of liminal individuals through the situated knowledge and imagination of one of them, the homodiegetic narrator. The conversation with Gershon is kept alive through Eva’s character, a friend of the narrator but also one of the ten thousand German children who were transported to England. By creatively retracing Eva’s life story, the author added to the voices that Gershon recorded a voice of those who did not survive. The interweaving of *We Came as Children* in *Come ospiti* bespeaks a powerful act of sustained imagination that transcends national and linguistic boundaries in order to narrate history from a different situated perspective.

²⁵ In dealing with Marguerite Duras’s Indochinese works, Cixous argues that in order to understand the author’s identity as an artist, her texts should be read not in isolation, but as an intertext. This is a textualized place, not a real one, but one that the woman writer, separated from her land of birth, creates on the basis of memory and imagination and from which she writes. An intertext is the writer’s “country,” her *terragraphica*. See H el ene Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*” and *Other Essays*, ed. Deborah Jenson, trans. Sarah Cornell et al., with an introductory essay by Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), and Erica L. Johnson, *Home, Maison, Casa: The Politics of Location in Works by Jean Rhys, Marguerite Duras, and Erminia dell’Oro* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 2003), 156-59.

²⁶ Karen Gershon, *We Came as Children: A Collective Autobiography* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1966), “Introduction,” unpaginated.

Furthermore, this written exchange with a non-Italian text, also visible in the transition/translation between English and Italian, complements the oral “confidences” that are such an integral part of the plot and helps shape the autobiographical, gendered narrative space into a transnational arena. Edward Said’s idea that the only home available is to be found in writing,²⁷ an assumption that I endorse with respect to Cagli Seidenberg, brings me to consider how the negotiation of languages and texts is carried out from a liminal position. Exile and home are always concepts in dialogue, and if, for the exiled writer, “language becomes the country,”²⁸ I argue that Cagli Seidenberg could only be *chez soi* in a displaced Italian language. She fashioned a sense of home by rooting her writing in the official language of Italy and by making that code shift and drift towards the unfamiliar sounds and symbols to which she was exposed during her own geographical peregrinations.

The passage from her novel quoted above—“life had decided my destiny, I could not choose anything, neither the place where I wanted to live, nor the people that I wanted to have around, or the language in which I would have liked to express myself” (123)—suggests that for Cagli Seidenberg, the choice of writing in Italian outside of Italy is a declaration of belonging as much as an act of ethical commitment to the historical truth of racial persecutions and an act of resistance to the constraints of the new environment. I will recall, however, that in precisely that new frame of the Berkeley hills and surrounding areas, she started to practice the art of writing with American master and founder of the Stanford Creative Writing program, Wallace Stegner. I contend that Cagli Seidenberg’s long, extraterritorial parenthesis was instrumental in turning a previously passive sense of national belonging into a critical return journey to her native language and country. To put it differently, the narrator’s character of “mite ribelle” in *Come ospiti* elicits a taciturn social attitude that might evoke that of the author while it also applies to her *modus scribendi*, which displaces a monolingual territorial Italian culture by creating bridges between it and foreign models.

I have discussed elsewhere the influence of Massimo Bontempelli on Cagli Seidenberg’s stylistic goal of “povertà conquistata” (“poverty obtained”), which inspires the *Ciclo* as a whole.²⁹ That style is “naked,” simple and deliberately subdued because it directs our attention outside of the single word and toward the testimonial function of writing. To effectively convey the forced mobility of the displaced individual or group, writing must follow that movement closely. Hence, the author’s tactical moves among a substantial variety of transnational sources voice the strife of the refugee community depicted in *Come ospiti*.³⁰ Within this polyphony,

²⁷ In his meditations on Adorno’s autobiography *Minima Moralia*, Said also highlights that writing is a fragile and provisional home. The text is “uninhabitable” as the writer, or at least the intellectually committed writer that Said has in mind, does not allow themselves “the sleep of self-satisfaction” (568). The writer never ceases to explore the world we live in with a “worldliness,” (301) courageous, attitude, and to rewrite it. See Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), especially “Between Worlds,” 554-68.

²⁸ Cixous, “*Coming to Writing*,” xx.

²⁹ See Ferraro, “Drawing Testimony,” especially 155-56. Bontempelli was married to Amelia Della Pergola, a sister of Cagli Seidenberg’s mother.

³⁰ This transnational pool includes many other references, for instance: the journals of Corrado Alvaro (*Quasi una vita*), Katherine Mansfield, Franz Kafka, and André Gide are briefly mentioned next to Gershon’s book; the title of the novel comes from a line by Paul Celan; an American nursery rhyme (“The farmer in the dell”) prompts Italian childhood memories of “O quante belle figlie, Madama Dorè;” a Christmas carol coexists with the Hebrew song that accompanies the celebration of a Bar Mitzvah; a few lines from the *Divine Comedy* introduce the story of a Jewish Florentine cousin of the narrator; Guido Gozzano’s poetry is used to speak of the fog and death in the Berkeley hills; and two lines of a song by Harry Belafonte on “weak foundations” become a comment on the fragile relationship between Robin and Eva.

Gershon's book is the most intertextually entangled with the narrative development of the novel, while the integration of Corrado Cagli's visual artwork underscores the author's interest in intermedial relationships between literature and painting that reconnect this to the other volumes of the *Cycle*, especially *Il Tempo*. Reproductions of more than a dozen paintings, drawings and a bronze sculpture appear throughout the novel to highlight the centrality of women, motherhood, and anguish.³¹ Unlike Gershon's volume, the thematic dialogue with Corrado Cagli's works rests solely upon the juxtaposition of images and text, although some of those images engage with the written text in a subtle manner, as in the dreamlike symbology of the forest in *Bosco nel Lemery* (122) reproduced on the same page as the narrator's description of Eva's painting, a greyish leafless tree trunk against a gloomy sky, with reddish cracks reflecting her wounded identity ("Quel fondo cupo [...] quel grosso tronco grigiastro sembrava appassito [...] Mi faceva pensare non alla vita, ma alla morte. E tutte le strisce rossastre che lo percorrevano erano simili a tante ferite semiaperte") (123). Despite the variety of sources that the novel encompasses, Cagli Seidenberg's writing is carefully orchestrated: it reaches across borders in order to articulate the discomfort of trauma and displacement.

Having explored the transnational links visible in *Come ospiti*, I will now reconnect its author to Italy by reframing Boccaccio in the Berkeley hills, a key place for the lived experience and artistic activity of Ebe Cagli Seidenberg. To be clear, the presence of a canonical Italian writer like Boccaccio is intangible in the novel. Because of that intangibility, I recognize that my reading may appear unorthodox if it is not understood within the larger opus of the author, in particular through her doctoral dissertation, titled "Dualità stilistica e ideale nel Decameron" (1943).³² My reading suggests that key narrative themes of the last volume of *Ciclo dell'esilio obbligato*, such as coalition politics, individual emotions, and the circulation of affect, are interconnected with a much earlier literary work that the Jewish Italian writer produced only a few years after her arrival in the United States as a refugee, and that she later referenced in the volume *Il Tempo*. I hypothesize that the author's reading of the *cornice* of the Decameron may be regarded as a subtext of the representational "frame" of the Berkeley hills in *Come ospiti*. Cagli Seidenberg (or Ebe Speranza Cagli, according to her maiden name) begins her dissertation by identifying three key mo(ve)ments in the *cornice*—individual experience, overcoming of the individual, and contemplative return—defined according to the relationship that the members of the "compagnia" ("group") establish with the surrounding reality.³³ At first, the plague sweeps away everything, so that the individual is overwhelmed by the general, the crowd is indistinct, and no landscape can be discerned, until a group of young women, led by Pampinea, reacts to this deadly atmosphere. Pampinea utters "il primo commento dell'individuo singolo alla sciagura comune" ("the first comment of the single individual to the common tragedy"), which marks the transition from an unspecified subject to a distinct human being, with a proper name and story, and placed "in uno sfondo preciso, quello della sua casa" ("against a precise background, that of her/his house").³⁴ By exhorting her friends, likewise frightened, to join forces to escape death, Pampinea also initiates the second mo(ve)ment of the *cornice* that emerges from a collective effort, or a politics of survival by coalition.

³¹ See for instance the bronze sculpture titled *Madre senza figlio*, dated 1961 (68), or the book cover that reproduces the pastel drawing *Angoscia di Arlecchino*.

³² As a graduate student in the Department of Romance Languages, Cagli Seidenberg worked under the supervision of Charles Singleton and with the help of Leo Spitzer, as she acknowledged at the beginning of her dissertation.

³³ Ebe Speranza Cagli, "Dualità stilistica e ideale nel Decameron," (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1943), 9.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

So far, the ravages and dread of the Black Death may be figuratively associated with the devastations and terror caused by Nazi-Fascism in Europe.³⁵ Both phenomena push a crowd of people out of a certain territory, although the refugees of *Come ospiti* do not plan their escape as a group, but rather meet each other in a “safe” place. The language used to describe Pampinea’s chosen refuge evokes that later employed to represent the Berkeley hills:

è più che una campagna ridente, è un’affermazione di tutto quello che è loro negato nella città colpita dal flagello, è bellezza, gioia, salute; ed è ancor di più: è il luogo ove ogni affanno materiale sarà abbandonato, [...] è il *paradiso terrestre* ove le creature che hanno schivato e vinto la morte riposeranno in olimpica letizia: “Quivi s’odono gli uccelletti cantare, veggionvisi verdeggiare i colli e le pianure.”³⁶

(it is more than a pretty countryside, it is an assertion of everything that is denied to them in the scourged city, it is beauty, joy, and health, and even more: it is the place where every material concern will be abandoned, [...] it is an *earthly paradise* where the creatures that have avoided and defeated death will rest in Olympic delight: “Here we shall hear the chant of birds, and see verdant hills and plains.”)

When Cagli Seidenberg wrote these comments, she had not yet moved to California, and in her mind, the scourged city could well be Fascist Rome rather than Boccaccio’s Florence. More important than the similarities between landscapes (Berkeley and Tuscan hills) or cityscapes (Florence and Rome), however, is the repositioning of the survivors, their new perspective on here, where they live safely, and there, the city left behind. We thus turn to the third defining mo(ve)ment in the *cornice*: the “contemplative return” to the abandoned city through an elusive gaze. According to the author, the “onesta compagnia” closes itself in a rigid “grazia schematica” (“schematic grace”) that resembles that of the landscape, and in so doing, dehumanizes itself, loses memory of the other world, and looks at it from faraway. In this context, the practice of “novellare” that the survivors undertake has a merely aesthetic purpose (“porgere diletto”), disconnected from their emotional life.³⁷ As a result, they give up the role that they played in their plagued city (although a “passive” one, being destined to die) and become “spectators” of the world that animates their novellas.³⁸ Isolation and dehumanization, the desire to leave the

³⁵ David Steel’s 1981 essay “Plague Writing: From Boccaccio to Camus,” *Journal of European Studies* 11, no. 42 (June 1981): 88-110, establishes a literary plague canon, and Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague*, trans. Stuart Gilbert (New York: Knopf, 1948) has extensively been read as an allegory of the Nazi occupation of France during World War II, yielding stimulating discussions of witnessing and telling within *The Plague*. See Shoshana Felman, “Camus’ *The Plague*, or a Monument to Witnessing,” in *Reading the Past: Literature and History*, eds. Tamsin Spargo and Catherine Belsey (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave, 2000), 127-46; and Jennifer Cooke, “Writing Plague: Transforming Narrative, Witnessing, and History,” *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 55 (January 2009): 21-42, and ead., *Legacies of Plague in Literature, Theory and Film* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) especially Chapter 1, “Writing Plague: Defoe and Camus,” 16-43.

³⁶ Cagli, “Dualità stilistica,” 5, my emphasis.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6-8.

³⁸ The original reads: “sfilano dinanzi a loro *personae* tragiche e *personae* comiche; essi a volte risponderanno con cenni di pietà, a volte con aperte risa, ma da lungi, dal loro luogo di contemplazione” (“tragic and comic *personae* parade before them; at times, they will respond with signs of compassion, at times with laughter, but from a distance, from their place of contemplation”) (*ibid.*, 9, original emphasis).

past behind, emotional detachment, and insubstantial *novellare/conversare* are, remarkably, the same components of the representational frame of the Berkeley hills. Those “spettatori” are reminiscent of the “ospiti” portrayed by Cagli Seidenberg. Likewise, the human quality of “compassione” (“compassion”) that opens the Decameron (“Umana cosa è aver compassione degli afflitti” [“Tis humane to have compassion on the afflicted”])³⁹ is a constant concern of the author. With Boccaccio’s artwork, as with her brother Corrado’s or Gershon’s, she appropriates to re-elaborate, combine, and produce something new, hybrid, and original. In *Come ospiti*, a certain atmosphere of ostensible normalcy is re-enacted to be questioned and even subverted by the narrator’s intervention that demonstrates the risks of a “contemplative return” marked by silence, suppression of emotions, and disengagement. The result, I contend, is a liminal literary space molded on a national tradition, articulating an intersectional poetics, set to achieve a transnational status.

In *Come ospiti* and the *Ciclo* at large, Cagli Seidenberg explores multiple belongings and adopts multiple literary and cultural traditions to produce a transnational discourse on the effects of racial persecution on individual and group identities and allegiances. Having published a novel in English well before the volumes of the *Ciclo*,⁴⁰ the Italian-born writer deliberately chose to frame her discourse on forced exile in Italian for an Italian readership as a way to reconnect and talk back to the expelling country. It is perhaps ironic that her linguistic choice signals the tension between an aspiration to travel homeward, back to Italy and an Italian readership, and the actual confinement or cultural marginalization of this Jewish Italian author on both sides of the Atlantic. This situation makes it all the more relevant that we ask now, eighty years after the promulgation of the 1938 *leggi razziali*: How can we effectively approach Cagli Seidenberg’s testimonial writing today? In which ways are her representations of suspended identities, refugees, women, plural belongings, and coalitions politics relevant to current discourses about Italy and Italian-ness?

I will conclude with some considerations about *Come ospiti* in relation to disciplinary and linguistic borders. First, *Come ospiti* is both a transnational work and a gendered literary space that, with its polyphony of female voices, captures ethical issues and writing strategies that, as Lucamante argues, have yet to be adequately recognized within Shoah literature, particularly with regard to Jewish Italian women writers. The last work of the *Ciclo dell’esilio obbligato* is a testament to the value that Cagli Seidenberg confers on the situated experience of female refugees and the transnational and intersectional lens crucial to capturing the nuances of that historical experience. More broadly, for the author, writing was an act of ethical responsibility to historical truth. Writing is remembering, overcoming, and denouncing silence by telling stories of being called “other,” being treated as such, and rethinking life and allegiances from this perspective. If healing is out of reach for the witness-writer, the question remains about the effectiveness of remembrance for a wider audience, a crucial question linked to the fear of not being understood.⁴¹ Lucamante, for instance, underlines how exercises of public memory, such

³⁹ Proemio.2, bilingual version based on Italian text by Vittore Branca (1992) and English translation by James McMullen Rigg (1903) available at

https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Italian_Studies/dweb/texts/DecShowText.php?myID=proem&lang=it.

⁴⁰ *Before the Cock Crows* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1957, under the pseudonym of Bettina Postani). The author later translated it as *L’incantatore di serpenti* (Foggia: Bastogi, 1984).

⁴¹ A pivotal writer like Primo Levi talked of the need for clear communication that originates in the unhealing wound and the high price of not being understood. For those like him who experienced the camps, not being understood literally meant the risk of a quick death, but Levi incorporated this lesson in his writing. For him, writing was a technological tool that, like the telephone, has to work reliably; in other words, it was “a high precision work”

as *il giorno della memoria* that was established in 2000, are problematic and insufficient, as they limit memory to the past and its negativity. In turn, discussing Elena Janeczek, one of the most eloquent voices of the Shoah in Italy, Lucamante stresses the need for an expansive memory of the Jewish people as a positive space of transmission beyond the Holocaust and toward the future, a memory reconstructed also through renegotiations of linguistic categories in order to be functional in and to the present.⁴² At a crucial moment in our society, when the construction and circulation of narratives based on hatred and fear are rampant, it is all the more relevant to reflect on the agency of literature in engaging with its readers and creating spaces of resistance to hegemonic narratives. This question is of course tied to how we approach the texts we read. For example, the knowledge that Cagli Seidenberg embraced literary writing as an ethical duty in order to offer testimony on racial persecution has shaped my reading of her work. Moreover, according to her writing, she positioned herself as an Italian exile writing in Italian and a “refugee” or “Italian Jewish refugee” but did not self-identify with other terms, such as “Italian American” or “Italian immigrant.” As labels are being rethought in Transnational Italian Studies, whatever label we apply to Ebe Cagli Seidenberg, we should bear in mind that she dialogued, as an Italian-language writer abroad, with “the ur-sign that is /Italy/”⁴³ to voice anti-essentialist views of Italian identity. I have elected to analyze *Come ospiti* across borders because at the heart of this novel lies the author’s testimony or literary *confidenze* about the entanglements of emotions, plural belongings, and allegiances. In other words, I have adopted reading across borders as a strategy to approach the author’s writing across borders. And yet, while this writing attempts to communicate the need for thinking of belonging in the plural, the fact that none of the volumes comprised in the *Ciclo dell’esilio obbligato* is available in English, the language of exile for its author, poses a major limit in terms of audience and scholarship.

Translation is vital to facilitating transnational movements of texts and bolstering the agency of literature. As Parati highlights in *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy*, translation plays an essential role in reaching wide, diverse readerships and promoting remappings of belonging in the plural. Access to the cultural text precedes the possibility of an ethics of reading that she considers a crucial passage in the circulation of affect and thus the actualization of social change.⁴⁴ Translations are indispensable to furthering critical investigations of the issues that Ebe

(*The Voice of Memory: Interviews, 1961-1987*, eds. Marco Belpoliti and Robert Gordon [Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001], 168, cited in Probyn, 87). On writing and affect in Levi, see Elspeth Probyn, “Writing Shame,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, eds. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 82-90.

⁴² Lucamante, *Forging Shoah Memories*, 225-26. Janeczek calls herself not just a child of the Holocaust, with its emphasis on the negativity of the past, but a “daughter of the Jewish people” which stresses cultural belonging, allegiance, and a project for the future. Lucamante remarks on Janeczek’s semantic shift from children-Shoah to children-memory of the Jewish people, that is consistent with Children of the Holocaust but is endowed with a larger reference: *Figli della memoria ebraica* (Children of the Jewish Memory).

⁴³ Anthony J. Tamburri, “Afterword: Rethinking Labels. The ‘Italian’ Writer as Exemplar, or Distinct Categories as Quixotic,” in *New Italian Migrations to the United States: Vol. 2: Art and Culture Since 1945*, eds. Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 199. Tamburri’s afterword (193-202) reviews several labels such as “real Italians,” immigrants “living Italy” while residing abroad, “new mobilities,” and “writers ‘in Italian,’” and proposes a conceptual paradigm that broadens the horizons of Italian Studies by recognizing the sign we know as /Italy/ as the common denominator of at least three categories—(im)migrants within Italy who write in Italian, and writers of the Italian diaspora writing either in Italian or in local languages (e.g., English). A fourth category includes non-Italian diaspora writers or “italici” (e.g., Jhumpa Lahiri) who are also in dialogue with Italy (198-99).

⁴⁴ Reading literature, according to Parati, is an ethical act that informs everyday lives: it involves forgetting about “the self” for a time in order to experience someone else’s life, as well as developing an ethical stance that moves

Cagli Seidenberg's works pose within transnational communities. Most of those issues remain underexplored in several fields of study, from Italian and Italian American literature to gender, intersectional, transnational, and Jewish studies. A novel like *Come ospiti* provides a rare, firsthand literary account of what it was like to be a Jewish Italian woman among other European refugees in the United States in the decades that followed World War II. Its translation would facilitate more nuanced and cross-cultural critical discourses of the transnational coalition politics within refugee communities that I have explored in this essay. Indeed, translation promotes the recognition of literary productions as part of what Parati calls "affective transnationality" or "an experience shared by people on the move,"⁴⁵ or even a plurality of personal and communal spaces defined by migrations from Italy where connections are mediated through affect and are often visible in cultural texts and political discourses—a transnationality of Italian spaces that is being remapped as contemporary migrations to Italy participate in its complexity.

beyond the familiar and pursues the creation of affinities with diverse communities. The humanities indeed "focus on what it means to be human" (*Migrant Writers*, 8).

⁴⁵ Parati, *Migrant Writers*, 23.