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Title: Addressing Each Other's Eyes Directly: From Adriana Cavarero's "Relating Narratives" to Elena Ferrante's Intersectional Ethics of Narrative Relations

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 7 (2020)

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Publication date: February 2021
Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, "Themed Section"
Permalink: http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/5-addressing-each-others-eyes-directly

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Abstract: Narratives that provide honest portrayals of women's relationships appear to be very popular at the moment. This may seem as nothing new since feminist authors have recast female friendship as a potential site of subversion at least since the seventies. However, as critics have highlighted, it is particularly since the eighties and nineties that representations of ambivalent female relations have become more prominent, mostly as a result of the influence of intersectional and decolonial theories such as those pioneered, respectively, by Audre Lorde and María Lugones. This article contextualizes Elena Ferrante's work within the current transnational tendency of developing an ethics of female relations that does not underplay difference but rather investigates the emancipatory potential of the B-side of female friendships. I will argue that Ferrante both draws upon and expands the theory of intersubjective narrative signification developed by philosopher Adriana Cavarero in works such as *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood.* In tune with both Lorde's and Lugones's ideas, the Neapolitan novels examine how intersecting differences that challenge the notion of a perfect female relationality, and the form of a "relating narrative" as theorized by Cavarero, can nonetheless be reclaimed as an empowering tool for redefining subjectivity and projecting new forms of collective belonging through the art of storytelling.

Key words: Narrative friendship, coloniality of gender, intersectionality, decolonial feminism, second-wave feminism, fourth-wave feminism

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Addressing Each Other's Eyes Directly: From Adriana Cavarero's "Relating Narratives" to Elena Ferrante's Intersectional Ethics of Narrative Relations.[1]

Loredana Di Martino

> "As women, we have been taught either to ignore our differences, or to view them as causes for separation and suspicion rather than as forces for change. Without community, there is no liberation … But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist."[2]

> "We have to learn … to speak with pride of our complexity, of how in itself it informs our citizenship, whether in joy or in rage. To do this we have to learn the art of getting lost in the difficulties and impracticalities."[3]

> "Friendship across positions of inequality has to be worked for rather than discovered or found."[4]

Elena Ferrante's so-called Neapolitan novels, the tetralogy that begins with *My Brilliant Friend*, are often cited as examples of how representations of female friendships have once again taken center stage in fiction. Yet, Ferrante's critics have expressed contrasting opinions on the role that friendship plays in the quartet. Some have interpreted Ferrante's representation of friendship as perhaps one of the most innovative ways in which the author carries out her quest of rewriting the western *polis* from a space of subjugation into an ethical community based on gender difference.[5] It has also been suggested that friendship might be one of the ways in which Ferrante unravels that so-called mother-daughter knot that has often thwarted literary attempts to reconstruct broken female genealogies.[6] Other critics, however, have interpreted the conflicted bond linking the tetralogy's protagonists as a problematic recasting of the ethics of sisterhood of second-wave feminism, one that ultimately undoes the belief in the socially transformative power of female kinship and endorses a desire for emancipation through self-affirmation.[7] This article argues that the Neapolitan novels may provide a successful investigation into the transformative power of female friendship precisely because they do not unquestioningly conform to the ethics of relations of second-wave feminism. Drawing on Isabella Pinto's claim that we should position Ferrante's work in a "diffractive" zone where second-wave feminism interacts with more recent (trans)feminisms to generate new outcomes, a position that echoes and amplifies Tiziana de Rogatis's argument about the eclectic nature and transnational character of Ferrante's feminist storytelling, I claim that Ferrante's tetralogy revisits a feminist tradition

[1] I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Adalgisa Giorgio for encouraging me to develop my ideas on Ferrante and providing feedback to the first version of this article. Giorgio first made reference to Audre Lorde during a talk delivered at the conference *Elena Ferrante in a Global Context*, held at Durham University in June 2019 (Giorgio, "Double Acts of Female Creativity"). That talk inspired me to give a new direction to the ideas on Cavarero and Ferrante that I presented at the same conference. I am lucky to have met such a brilliant and generous scholar.

[2] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112.

[3] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 152.

[4] Lugones and Rosezelle, "Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models," 143.

[5] See, for instance, Benedetti's "Il linguaggio dell'amicizia," de Rogatis's *Parole Chiave* and its expanded English translation, *Elena Ferrante's Keywords*, Milkova's "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna," and Ricciardi's "Can the Subaltern Speak in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?"

[6] See, among others, de Rogatis, *Parole Chiave*, 113-121, and, in relation to Ferrante's previous novel, Elwell's "Breaking Bonds." Marianne Hirsch's theory of a mother-daughter plot has been applied to the Italian context by works such as Giorgio's *Writing Mothers and Daughters*, Benedetti's *The Tigress in the Snow*, and Sambuco's *Corporeal Bonds*.

[7] See, for instance, Lucamante's "Undoing Feminism" and Guarro Romero's "Narrative Friendships."

that, in Italy, would find one of its highest expressions in the so-called *pensiero della differenza* (theory of sexual difference) in order to both question and try to augment its ability to work within an intersectional context of difference.[8] Through the story of Elena and Lila's ambivalent friendship, Ferrante does not forego a feminist ethics of interrelationality in favor of what has been defined as a more typically post-feminist emphasis on self-affirmation.[9] Rather, in my view, the author draws upon Adriana Cavarero's feminist paradigm of "relating narrative," while expanding its ethical project to examine how multiple systems of oppression might exacerbate the effects of sexism, causing an unresolved dialectic between autonomy and intersubjectivity that makes it harder for women of an unprivileged background, such as Elena and Lila in the tetralogy, to engage in intersubjective signification. Whereas Ferrante focuses primarily on the intersection between gender and social class and references other structural categories only indirectly, through an exploration of the Orientalist tradition that has evacuated the Italian South from the "imagined community" of the modernized, Northern-centric and less ambiguously *white* nation, I propose that we put her texts in dialogue with those of North American feminists of color who have been among the first to address the issues that might affect women's sociality within intersectional contexts of difference, and have paved the way for the type of decolonial feminism theorized by thinkers such as María Lugones, which conceptualizes intersectionality as the starting point for developing an inclusive politics of resistance against racialized and capitalist gender oppression.[10] Like feminists such as Audre Lorde who have underlined the importance of Black women to come "eye to eye" with those angers and fears that keep them from recognizing one another and realizing the power of community, and writers, such as Toni Morrison, who have vividly represented this challenge in novelistic form, Ferrante threads "the tangle of unexplored needs and furies" that oftentimes leads women who are affected by interlocking oppressions to follow the saying "[e]rase or be erased!" instead of dismissing the "master's tools" of a patriarchal and neocolonial profit economy that aims to divide and conquer by fostering the reproduction of relations of domination.[11] Like them and decolonial thinkers such as Lugones, she also suggests that it is only "through threading this tangle that a new vision of the self and possibility" might emerge that is capable of liberating unprivileged women while also emancipating communities where, as a result of what the tetralogy describes as a new "order of the world" based on the return of "exploitation of man by man and the logic of maximum profit" as "lynchpins of freedom and democracy everywhere," local practices of violence have "opened up to" and, thus, attempt to subjugate also "new cultures."[12] My ultimate claim is that, by bringing an intersectional dimension to a feminist ethics of relations rooted in the *pensiero della differenza*, and striving to find a form that is

[8] Pinto refers to the diffractive approach theorized by materialist philosophers such as Karen Barad. Pinto, *Elena Ferrante: Poetiche e politiche*. de Rogatis articulates her position throughout *Parole chiave*. See, for instance, *Parole chiave* 17-18, 273, and the new conclusion included in the English translation of her book, *Keywords*, 276-91. Lorde comments on the limitations of second-wave feminism in "An Open Letter to Mary Daly" and "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," among others. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 66-71, 110-113.

[9] Lucamante, "Undoing Feminism."

[10] Lugones has openly recognized Lorde's influence in her development of a feminism that shifts the focus to the coloniality of gender in order to turn the discourse of overlapping inequalities from a site of representation and exposure of oppression into a mechanism to craft alliances across multiple differences and lines of power. See Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism," and Lugones and Rosezelle, "Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Model." On Italy's internal orientalism see, for instance, Verdicchio's *Bound by Distance*, Schneider's *Italy's "Southern Question*," and Moe's *The View from Vesuvius*.

[11] Lorde, *Sister Outsider* 163, 154. For Morrison see, for instance, *Sula*.

[12] The first quotation comes from Lorde's "Eye to Eye," in *Sister Outsider*, 163. It is, however, in the essay "Age Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference" that Lorde more clearly frames her theory in a transnational context of multiple differences. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 114-123. The quotations from the tetralogy come from Ferrante's *The Story of the Lost Child*, 425, 460.

more suitable for "narratable identities" raised in the context of multiple differences, Ferrante ultimately continues to uphold a more "traditional" and compulsory need to develop an ethics of interdependence. Seen in this light, her writing seems to be more in tune with the goals of the emerging phenomenon of a fourth wave of feminism that seeks to create broader and transnational connections, than with those of some, though not all, of those third-wavers who have pursued a more individualistic path to liberation.

An Ethics of Antagonist Female Relations

In an article published in *The Guardian*, Gwendolyn Smith reflects on how visual representations of female friendships have recently become very popular.[13] Reporting her conversation with April De Angelis, who adapted *My Brilliant Friend* for the stage, Smith writes that one of the reasons why portrayals of female relations, such as the ones we see today that do not ignore the dark side of women's friendship and yet do not merely reaffirm old stereotypes about female ambivalence, have gone unrepresented for so long might be that "[w]hat is frightening about women's friendship is there's a power in being together …. There's that sense of, you know, divide and rule—you keep women separate."[14] As this comment suggests, the increased tendency to portray female relations on screen is, alongside the frequent representation of gender violence, an expression of the current awareness that misogyny, alongside homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, and the fear of the black or differently-abled body continues to be an important part of contemporary society. In addition, it is an indication that, instead of disappearing, patriarchy has only extended its domain to include the multiple discourses that threaten its power both on a local and on a global scale. The increasing worldwide cases of domestic and political violence against women, combined with the exploitation of women's (and, particularly, unprivileged women's) bodies, international attempts to undermine hard-won women's rights through reform bills that want to set the clock back on abortion or divorce, and less or more notable sexual scandals are clear indications that, as Elena Ferrante has claimed, in spite of the results achieved by women's "'crossing of the boundary," "male power, whether violently or delicately imposed, is still bent on subordinating us"; "we just have to look at the world in its entirety to understand that the conflict is far from over and that everything we have gained can still be lost."[15] Following this logic, the boom in representations of female friendship should also be contextualized within the recent tendency to counteract the global expansion of patriarchal power caused by the triumph of neoliberalism through the creation of new forms of connection. The transnational though Argentinian-based "#NiUnaMenos" collectives against the *machista* war on women are perhaps one of the most successful expressions of this tendency. Likewise, this type of movement also underlines a recent trend, within feminism, to dismiss the more suffused tones of the so-called third wave, where an internalized feminist awareness dealt more ironically with the neo-conservativism of neoliberalism, in order to rekindle the more radical political project of older generations.[16] Today's focus, as some have argued, is on putting the female body once again directly at the center of narratives of social change, though this time by going against strict separatist schemes, and using that body as a mechanism to encourage subjectivities who are differently affected by interlocking combinations of

[13] Smith, "Sister Act: From Killing Eve to Little Women."
[14] April De Angelis in Smith, "Sister Act: From Killing Eve to Little Women."
[15] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 326, 349, 362.
[16] On third-wave of feminism see, for instance, Baumgardner and Richards's *Manifesta*. de Rogatis discusses the #MeToo Movement in relation to Ferrante's poetics in *Parole chiave* (see, for instance, 17-18).

inequality to draw power from one another in order to overturn both the old and new forms of domination that have merged into the discourse of neoliberal patriarchy.[17]

Female friendship is a popular topic also in contemporary literature.[18] Yet, as far as writing is concerned, feminist authors have reclaimed female friendship from the marginal space and secondary status it was accorded with respect to familial and heterosexual bonds to recast it as a site of subversion at least since the seventies, if not before then.[19] From Adrienne Rich's theory that sustaining female friendships can restore an empowering "lesbian continuum" and Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), to the self-awareness practices of starting from oneself in a relational women-only space developed, in Italy, by collectives such as those in Rome and Milan, and represented, for instance, in Dacia Maraini's *Donna in guerra / Woman at War* (1975), feminist authors worldwide have used female relationality to develop both a way of being and a symbolic order away from the conditioning of the Law and Logos of the Father.[20] Yet, as the scholar of gender movements Judith Taylor argues, it is particularly since the eighties and nineties that the written representation of female relationships gone awry has become more prominent. This is a trend that can be witnessed across different generations of writers in the Anglo-American world but whose underlying concern is not "unique to these countries."[21] One of the reasons behind this phenomenon, Taylor contends, is the impact of intersectional feminism and its demystification of a discourse of sisterhood, the one supported by second-wave feminists, that oftentimes failed to reflect on the multiple positionalities of identity.[22] Focusing their fight on sexism, 1970s feminists were more interested in underplaying differences than in recognizing overlapping forms of oppression.[23] In doing so, they may have in turn themselves perpetuated oppression by either failing to realize that they were assuming the white and/or middle-class perspective as universal, or, in the case of those who did, by not recognizing that women can be not only passive but also active agents of the classist and racist elements of patriarchy.[24] As Ivy Schweitzer argues, many second wavers did not realize that, by avoiding a systematic analysis of differences, they often ended up reaffirming rather than questioning the homosocial ethics of relations at the root of western patriarchal discourse. Based on the Greco-Roman tradition, and mystifying one of the types of friendship described in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, such discourse constructed ideal friendship, namely, the type of relation that was meant to serve as a basis for the civic community as opposed to relationships based on utility or pleasure, as a masculinist, elitist, and often militaristic politics of socialization based on sameness

[17] On fourth-wave feminism see, for instance, Diamond's "The Fourth Wave of Feminism" and Cochrane's "The Fourth Wave" and *All the Rebel Women*.

[18] See, for instance, Clark's "Sister Act: Female Friendship in Fiction."

[19] See, for instance, Picchietti's *Relational Spaces* in the Italian context and Schweitzer's "Making Equals" in North America. In her study of 19-century Italian domestic fiction, Katharine Mitchell argues that women authors of this time already used female friendship as a means to create solidarity among middle-class women. Mitchell, *Italian Women Writers*, 122-149.

[20] For Rich see "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." On Italian feminism see, for instance, Cavarero and Restaino's *Le filosofie femministe* and, in the English language, the anthology by Bono and Kemp, *Italian Feminist Thought*.

[21] Taylor, "Enduring Friendship."

[22] Intersectionality is a term coined by legal scholar and civil rights activist Kimberlé Crenshaw to define an approach that has been used since the 1970s by radical black feminists. Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex." One of the most important anthologies of intersectional theory is Moraga and Anzaldúa's *This Bridge Called My Back*.

[23] In a personal memoir inspired by Ferrante's tetralogy, where she recollects both the A- and B-side of the relations with her "brilliant" second-wave feminist friends Carolyn Heilbrun, Diane Middlebrook, and Naomi Schor, Nancy K. Miller acknowledges that the limitations of the second wave rested in both its mystification of sisterhood, which, like classical *philia*, confused reciprocity with replication, and the fact that "Of course, we were thinking mainly of ourselves, nice, middle-class, mostly Jewish young women (I almost wrote girls), and our stories. It did not occur to us that our 'we,' which seemed a giant step forward from 'I,' just as un-self-consciously failed, for the most part, to consider our situation in relation to women beyond our cohort." Miller, *My Brilliant Friends*, 119, 163, 195.

[24] Rich, for instance, criticizes "white solipsism" but does not address that women can be also active agents of racism. See Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization," and "An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich" in Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 81-109.

from which women and the unprivileged were automatically excluded. A friend could only be *another of a self* who was masculine and upper-class as highlighted by texts such as Cicero's *De Amicitia.*[25]

Yet, as Taylor contends, in spite of their awareness of the ideological limitations surrounding the discourse of sisterhood, recent narratives depicting difficult female friendships should not be read as a sign that writers have stopped searching for a feminist ethics of social relations.[26] Rather, they should be viewed as an indication of the desire to continue engaging with this central goal of feminism, but in the wake of the reflections of intersectional feminists who have shown that friendships aren't always sustaining and fulfilling. Women raised in the context of interlocking differences may be more prone to internalizing multiple oppressive types of socialization. The feeling of antagonism resulting from this internalization, as Lorde has demonstrated through her autobiography, can make it harder to recognize and be recognized by a similar other.[27] Thus, it can hinder the realization of that condition of intersubjectivity which, as the relational psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has argued, is the fundamental premise for rooting socialization no longer in the disciplinary Law of the Father and the development of a self-enclosed I but, rather, in the mutual recognition between two embodied sovereign equals that first occurs in the pre-oedipal phase.[28] Due to an unresolved dynamics between the need for autonomy and interdependence, subjects raised in the context of overlapping inequalities may feel threatened by another in similar positions unless, as Lorde argues, they engage in the difficult work of grappling also with the oppressor within and develop an intersubjective reflective gaze that will allow them to "relate within equality" and "develop new definitions of power" that help build alliances across differences.[29] As Taylor contends, taking into account the challenges that multiple inequalities pose to the realization of women's relational desires, writers of different generations have been engaging in what Lorde defined the "lengthy and difficult" process of stopping to pay "lip service to the idea of mutual support," "acknowledge[ing] the distance between our dreams and our present situation," and attempting to develop new rapports of intimacy among women that create more inclusive bonds of solidarity.[30] Some of these writers, Taylor argues, typically younger ones such as, for instance, Zadie Smith and Jillian and Mariko Tamaki in the English-speaking context, and we might add, among others, Rossana Campo in Italy, often tackle the issue with a less programmatic tone that does not dismiss the possibility that a certain degree of autonomy may foster interconnection. This is something that, as Taylor, similarly to Stefania Lucamante and Tullio Pagano in the Italian context, has suggested, should not always be read as an indication of post-feminist complicity with neoliberalism.[31] But there are still those who, in the wake of novelists such as Toni Morrison, and Dacia Maraini in Italy, continue to uphold the need for a more compulsory need to develop an ethics of interdependence, and do not shy away from carrying out the "ideational and emotional work" that it takes to achieve it.[32] It is my contention that Ferrante should be included in this last category of writers who believe that, in spite of the challenges posed by interlocking

[25] Schweitzer, "Making Equals."
[26] Taylor, "Enduring Friendship."
[27] Reflecting on her experience with a Black woman librarian who ignored her, Lorde writes: "We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting … at the same time as we try to obliterate it. … And we have become to each other unmentionably dear and immeasurably dangerous. I am writing about an anger so huge and implacable, so corrosive, it must destroy what it most needs…" Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 154-157. See also Lorde's reflections on her relationship with her mother in *Zamie.*
[28] Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*.
[29] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 122-123.
[30] Lorde, 175, 153.
[31] See Taylor's "Beyond 'Obligatory Camaraderie,' Lucamante's "Una Laudevole fine,'" and Pagano's "Per una lettura diasporica."
[32] Taylor, "Enduring Friendship," 109.

inequalities, interrelationality is "necessary for [women's] survival and political hopes," and one must engage in the painful labor of establishing a reflective ethics of relations through narration.[33] In this sense, Ferrante's work can also be seen as one of the emerging products of a more recent fourth wave of feminism: writers of different generations who, after believing that "the world was post-feminist, that sexism and misogyny were over, and feminism should pack their placards," have witnessed how "women in the public eye were often either sidelined or sexualized, represented exactly the same way as they had been in the 70s, albeit beneath a thin veil of irony," and have decided to restore the focus of their work more directly on the female body.[34] A passionate reader of feminist thinkers of various origins and generations, though, by her own admission, she came late to feminism, Ferrante has claimed to be as much "incapable of militancy" as she is of leaving out the disturbing stuff that challenges any unitary scheme, including traditional notions of sisterhood.[35] Whereas the author never mentions having read feminists of color, her view of female friendship as "a crucible of positive and negative feelings in a permanent state of ebullition" that represents the "tangled" way of being that women have developed for "historical reasons" resonates with Lorde's claims.[36] For Ferrante, as for Lorde, narrative must avoid clouding the representation of this tangle with "good intentions … that exalt sisterhood," resulting in "edifying cliché [that] might obstruct the effort involved in taking difficult paths."[37] The Italian author has also claimed to be worried by those among the younger generations who "appear convinced that the freedom they inherited is part of the natural state of affairs and not the temporary outcome of a long battle … in which everything could suddenly be lost."[38] Instead, Ferrante claims to stand with the "fierce young women, men who try to … sort through the countless contradictions."[39] Rather than dismissing the feminist experience, her goal is to build upon it and expand it to find new ways of transforming female consciousness into a mechanism of collective empowerment.

My claim is that both the ethics and the esthetics of Ferrante's work should be read in conversation with the work of philosopher Adriana Cavarero, a former member of the community of women philosophers known as Diotima that developed in the eighties. Cavarero left Diotima and began publishing alone in the early nineties, around the same time when Ferrante herself became a published writer. Following in the footsteps of "sexual difference feminists" from the 1970s such as Carla Lonzi, one of the founders of the Roman group *Rivolta femminile* (Female Revolt), and building on their own experience with the collectives centered on the Milan Women's Bookshop, the thinkers of Diotima argued for the overcoming of narratives of emancipation focused on equality that, as Lonzi had stated, reasserted the oppressive narrative of male power through a reaffirmation, for instance, of the master and slave dialectic of domination.[40] They advocated instead the need to build new and "unpredictable" notions of subjectivity and politics through the development of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising) and the practice of women's relations first initiated by Lonzi and others.[41] In

[33] Taylor, "Beyond "Obligatory camaraderie," 448. Lisa Mullenneaux draws some direct parallels between Lila and Elena's friendship in the tetralogy and Nel and Sula's friendship in Morrison's *Sula* in her book *Naples' Little Women*.
[34] Cochrane's "The Fourth Wave."
[35] Ferrante claims to be indebted to Firestone, Lonzi, Irigaray, Muraro, Cavarero, Gagliasso, Haraway, Butler, and Braidotti. See *Frantumaglia*, 332.
[36] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 329, 359.
[37] Ferrante*,* 329-330, 346.
[38] Ferrante, 332-33. Reflecting this tendency, Elena Greco's grown-up daughters, in the tetralogy, ridicule their mother's feminist work. *The Story of The Lost Child*, 456-59.
[39] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 333.
[40] See Lonzi's *Sputiamo su Hegel* and The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Sexual Difference.* Among Diotima's publications see *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* and *Mettere al mondo il mondo*.
[41] The term unpredictable subjectivity (*soggetto imprevisto*) comes from Carla Lonzi's *Sputiamo su Hegel.*

addition, inspired by Luce Irigaray, they also attempted to undo the matricidal logic of western discourses that was reinstated by Freudian psychoanalysis and to re-establish the importance of that primal woman-to-woman relationship that many radical feminists, with the notable exception of Lonzi, had chosen to abject in their efforts to fight the oppression of familial and filial bonds.[42] *Affidamento*, a woman's entrustment of herself to another woman in a higher position of power whom she chooses as a symbolic mentor in recognition of the authority of the mother, is one of the most famous notions of female kinship developed by Diotima.[43] Parting ways with the group, Cavarero, as Lucia Re argues, found a resolution to one of the major dilemmas linked to the practice of *affidamento*, namely, the hierarchical vision inherent to its vertical model of maternally-oriented community.[44] Whereas she continued to emphasize disparity, namely, that the practice of relations should not lead to an identification with the sameness of being woman, she located female friendship within a more horizontal notion of interdependency which unfolds through narrative.[45] My argument is that Ferrante draws on the theory of relational ontology that Cavarero developed in *In Spite Plato* and which she later expanded through the notion of narratable identity she theorized in a book that Ferrante claims to have been fundamental for her, *Relating Narratives*.[46] This theory conceptualizes the narration of a storyteller's life as an act performed by a narrator-friend through what is meant to be a gift of reciprocal recognition. Rescuing biography from a distanced and immortalizing epic gaze, this act turns narration into a mechanism of reclaiming the ontological existence of a singular yet intersubjective subject from the reduction into the "whatness" of social roles and the identification with a self-enclosed Universal subject that is assumed to be neutral but, in reality, conforms to male needs and desires. This is basically the subject of the Oedipal phase. Theories built around the centrality of this phase, as Benjamin argues, masculinized the root of identity by positing that, instead of becoming subject by recognizing and being recognized by a real fleshy other, as happens in the pre-oedipal phase, where socialization first occurs, the subject internalizes otherness by objectifying and assimilating the m/other into a solipsistic I through the imposition of the Law of the Father.[47] Inspired by Hannah Arendt, Cavarero's "relating narratives" seek to reclaim the ontological uniqueness, or "who," of the embodied subject, while drawing on intersubjective signification to reinstate a universe of reciprocal exposure that can help reconfigure a sense of the human and become the basis for a politics against the destruction of life.[48] They aim to restore the reciprocal gaze with the mother that is the foundation of the altruistic continuum of life, namely, that order of *physis* typical of pre-patriarchal societies which was interrupted when classical philosophers, starting with Plato, theorized the western *polis* as founded on the duality between mind and body.[49] Ultimately, this separation expelled the body as woman and the woman as body from civic discourses, elevating the self-generated male mind as the center of a politics, the one based on the narrative of the unlimited progress of human civilization, that went on to produce multiple forms of exploitation.[50] Cavarero posits that through a narrative exchange inspired by the feminist collective practices of consciousness-raising,

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[42] See, for instance, Irigaray's *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Like Rich, Carla Lonzi rejected institutionalized motherhood rather than maternity. On this topic see Benedetti, *The Tigress*, 85.
[43] One of the main theorizers of *affidamento* is Luisa Muraro. After collaborating with the Milan Women's Bookstore collective (*Sexual Difference*, 113-120), Muraro developed the theory in works such as *L'ordine simbolico della madre* and *Oltre l'uguaglianza*.
[44] Re, "Diotima's Dilemma."
[45] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 60.
[46] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 330.
[47] Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*.
[48] See also Cavarero, "Narrative Against Destruction."
[49] Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*.
[50] Cavarero, *Stately Bodies*.

women can overturn their exclusion from the phallogocentric *polis* fostering what the philosopher has described as "a return to Demeter."[51] Relating narratives construct a public horizon of reciprocity that can help recognize the true difference of the gendered identity while transforming women from objects of an essentialist discourse of biological reproduction into the agents of an altruistic ethics of living. Like storks, they can deliver a new Bios that makes "tangible" the intersubjective singularity of female identity, validating again the ontological existence of a Being that is rooted in the experience of natality.[52] From this "home of the living where meaning is returned to being born of a woman," the philosopher contends, "nothing prevents the imagining of another *polis*," a space "no longer…constituted as just an exercise in masculinity" but "where the rules of common living are found through the concrete matter that concerns it."[53]

Like Cavarero, Ferrante aims to use narrative as a way of restoring the gendered body as the origin of a way of being human which can help reconceptualize selfhood as well as collective identity within an intersubjective frame. Speaking about the current *polis*, the author has claimed that while more women are coming to occupy positions of power, this is mostly "on the condition that they don't take over, immediately, to try to really reinvent [politics]."[54] Such a reinvention, Ferrante suggests, would entail dismissing "the universal Man" in which subjectivity is often absorbed and being attracted into the vortex of *frantumaglia*, "the unredeemed chaos of fragments of our past and our remote past."[55] For Ferrante's protagonists, beginning with Delia in *Troubling Love*, this journey of self-awareness through the undoing of the "cold masculinity of covering" must facilitate a return of the abject, in the form of a "descent to the Mothers," whose goal is to restore what, in psychoanalytic terms, Benjamin has described as the pre-oedipal relational dimension of subjectivity.[56] In the author's opinion, as in Cavarero's, recomposing a reciprocal female gaze, and, thus, reconstructing a female genealogy, is necessary for "unpredictable" subjects to leave behind a death-oriented individualism that makes "the body dulled by sleep," and rediscover the "vigor of … plants," an ability of "expanding" into life which essentially entails restoring the interconnected nature of Being.[57] Crossing the boundaries of a self-enclosed model of subjectivity to recompose the paradigm of female interrelationality reconnects Ferrante's women with a material Bios, the "hidden sexuality" of the mothers that, as the author has claimed, even if oftentimes forced into cancellation, as for instance through that loss of "feminine qualities" that the protagonists of the Neapolitan tetralogy observe in their neighborhood's mothers, ultimately remains irreducible.[58] This Bios, Ferrante suggests, is capable of generating new life not merely because it can give birth, but, as in the case of one of the few women who were ever represented as makers of cities in the West, queen Dido in Book IV of *Aeneid*, because it can inspire the creation of alternative communities founded on the "connection between love and … civic life."[59] Before her brilliant heroines, the author interprets this "Virgilian connection" as

[51] Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 57-90.
[52] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives* and "Dire la nascita."
[53] Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 84-85.
[54] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 147.
[55] Ferrante*,* 89, 147.
[56] The quotations come from Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 56-7. Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*. In her reading of *Troubling Love*, drawing on myth and psychoanalysis, particularly the work of Melanie Klein, de Rogatis interprets the inverted quest of Delia/Persephone for Amalia/Demeter as an act of "reparation" for the daughter's matricidal desire which ends when, after both fusion with and differentiation from her mother, Delia "assumes her inheritance in an original way." de Rogatis, "Metamorphosis and Rebirth," 199. See also Pinto's reading of the novel in relation to philosophical feminist revisions of the myth of Demeter and Persephone, including Cavarero's own. Pinto, *Elena Ferrante*, 29-36.
[57] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 104.
[58] See Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 220 and *The Story of a New Name*, 98-103.
[59] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 149-50.

hinting to, without developing, an alternative discourse about the *polis*: the disentanglement of collective identity from an individualistic subjectivity in favor of a return to the altruism that had been exiled from Pygmalion's patriarchal labyrinth.[60] Reclaiming a feminine art of weaving and reweaving that, as Ferrante explains and critics have amply explored, reconnects her to both a seamstress mother who dreamed of salvific clothes and to legendary heroines who, like Ariadne, used it to find a way out of the patriarchal labyrinth, Ferrante's mythopoetics—an "underground" realism that intertwines the ultramodern with archaic female truths spoken from the depths of the cave, as de Rogatis has described it—similarly to Cavarero's "mythic revisionism," aims at destabilizing the discourse of patriarchal "dressmakers."[61] Its intention is to create a sort of "biomythography," as has been defined by Lorde,[62] where the "rejected ways of being" from a mythical past are weaved into the lives of contemporary heroines to provide access to the denied strength of alternative paradigms of identity which have been silenced.[63] As Ferrante suggests, her rewriting of myths ultimately entails seeking a "thread of orientation" that will enable her heroines to "govern [their] getting lost" after they have recognized themselves as an "aerial and aquatic mass of debris" whose life is "the storehouse of time without the orderliness of a history, a story."[64] Developing a narrative thread is essential for Ferrante's protagonists to gain the ability to "*vigere*" (exercise surveillance) over the "spread of life" that results from restoring subjectivity to that state "before language … instilled speech: a bright-colored explosion of sounds, thousands and thousands of butterflies with sonorous wings."[65] Similarly to Cavarero, who, borrowing from the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, writes that "'the gift of the written story which connects thoughts … saves one from letting herself go,'" Ferrante suggests that storytelling is essential to help those women who have broken the boundaries of a self-enclosed subjectivity develop an art of getting lost that can turn experience into an ethical practice.[66] Narrative, as in the case of Olga in *Days of Abandonment*, must facilitate the development of an "anti-disciplinary" and "expressive" self-surveillance that is necessary in order to be truly redeemed from what Ferrante defines as the condition of "individuals without affiliation."[67] This is a condition reflected in a textual tradition that, beginning with the classics, has mostly represented women as solitary and tragic heroines. Even when it has dealt with female kinship, it has failed to provide convincing examples of how women might be reincluded in the discourse of the *polis*. If the bond between Dido and her sister Anna*,* for instance, were allowed to develop into friendship, maybe that double of Ariadne who exits

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[60] Ferrante, 149-50.

[61] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 147-69, 16-20. Prior to the tetralogy, Ferrante's works have been read as feminist reinterpretations of the myths of Demeter and Persephone (*Troubling Love*), Medea (*The Days of Abandonment*), and Leda and the Swan (*The Lost Daughter*). In "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna," drawing on Elizabeth Grosz and Michel de Certeau, Milkova makes a parallel between the Cretan labyrinth and Ariadne's legend, and the male-dominated urban space that is challenged by the protagonists of the Neapolitan Novels. de Rogatis develops her theory of "underground" (and also "uncanny") realism in the conclusion to *Keywords* (see, particularly, 276-81). Re uses the term mythic revisionism to interpret Cavarero's philosophy. Re, "Mythic Revisionism."

[62] Lorde, *Zami*. Pinto has described *Frantumaglia* as a biomythography. Pinto, *Elena Ferrante: Poetiche e politiche*, 169. The same can be said about Ferrante's novels, particularly the tetralogy, where one cannot help but read Elena Greco's narrative as an extension of her author's autobiographical refashioning of both identity and the authorial image through the destabilizing effect produced by the encounter between history and revisited myths.

[63] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 107.

[64] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia*, 142, 100.

[65] Ferrante, 104, 100.

[66] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 55. This particular parallel between Cavarero and Ferrante has been explored also by Victor Xavier Zarour Zarzar in "Bumping into the Novelistic Scaffolding."

[67] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 147. The first definition ("anti-disciplinary") comes from Alsop, "Femmes Fatales." Alsop deals with Ferrante's use of this type of self-surveillance in *L'amore molesto* and *I giorni dell'abbandono*. The second ("expressive") comes from de Rogatis, *Parole Chiave*, 109-113.

the labyrinth built on the exile of love and forms a thread of bull skin that establishes the perimeter of a new city would not turn into a new Penthesilea *furens*, or a new Pasiphae who generates a monster by giving in to furious love and causing "[t]he past [to be] joined to the future" and Pygmalion's Tyre to "virtually rea[ch] Carthage."[68]

Alternative embodiments of Dido, Ferrante's heroines develop an awareness of the disempowerment generated by female isolation and reweave their life stories into relational narratives that attempt to reconstruct broken genealogies.[69] Yet, in their case, reestablishing intersubjectivity is further complicated by the unprivileged context of their origins. Such context frames the discourse of friendship within an intersectional setting, one that, as some critics have observed, *il pensiero della differenza*, not dissimilarly from second-wave feminism in North America, has left unexplored by omitting to develop the notion of disparity to include a thorough examination of the other differences that, in addition to gender, characterize the plurality of the woman experience.[70] This may be why, as we are told, the narrator of the Neapolitan tetralogy is not entirely receptive to feminism at first; she does not feel as prepared as women who "to varying degrees, must have grown up in easier circumstances" to change her skin and, even when she is ready, her desire is to engage in a process of consciousness-raising not with the members of the Northern Italian collectives that she joins thanks to her upper-class sister-in-law Mariarosa Airota, but with Lila.[71] Up to the tetralogy, Ferrante's narrators, like Elena in *My Brilliant Friend*, are former working-class women from Southern Italy who moved North to become writers, artists, or educators. As they come to realize, in the case of Elena thanks to Carla Lonzi's *Sputiamo su Hegel*, sociocultural ascent has not only further masculinized their heads through their gaining "male capacities" thinking that it was the only way to "be at [the] level…of their reason."[72] It has also silenced the visible traces of a subaltern origin that the enlightened Northern bourgeoise, perfectly represented not only by the intelligentsia Elena meets at the Normale University in Pisa but also by her mother in law, Adele, who wants to reeducate her, deems to be outside the logic of progress: "I learned to subdue my voice and gestures. I assimilated rules of behavior…I kept my Neapolitan accent as much under control as possible"; "To what secret pacts with myself had I consented, just to excel."[73] Sociocultural mobility further removes Ferrante's protagonists from a female genealogy that they had already sought to outdistance as a result of the internalized matricidal tendencies inherent to their matrophobia, namely, the fear of becoming like the oppressed and oppressive women in Elena and Lila's neighborhood whose deformed physical or mental traits and aggressive voice and behavior towards their children and other women are symbols of not only their subjection to patriarchy but also their perpetuation of its rule of divide and conquer.[74] Yet, climbing the socio-cultural ladder also removes Ferrante's women from a model of "thinking against" that, as

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[68] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 148-51.

[69] Like Elena in the tetralogy, Olga in *The Days of Abandonment* is also a writer, while Delia in *Troubling Love* is a cartoonist, and Leda in *The Lost Daughter* is an academic. Though in different ways, these characters all undergo a narrative reframing of identity.

[70] Whereas disparity was a way to address "social and personal inequality," *il pensiero della differenza*, in Teresa de Lauretis's view, did not carry out a broad analysis of difference. This was probably due to a sociohistorical location where, for instance, color and race were not yet an issue. de Lauretis, *Sexual Difference*, 8, 18. Wendy Pojmann, however, reflects on how Italy was already becoming a destination country in the 1970s. In her view, Italian feminism has been receptive to the hardships of migrant women but has not adequately addressed how class, race, religion, ethnicity redefine the female experience. Pojmann, "'We're Right Here!'"

[71] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 70, 282.

[72] Ferrante*,* 282.

[73] Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 332; *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 282.

[74] See Elena's description of the neighborhood mothers in Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, 37, and *The Story of a New Name*, 102-103. In addition, see the descriptions that the narrator provides of her mother, including the one where she contrasts Immacolata's limping leg to Lila's "agile legs." *My Brilliant Friend*, 46.

the tetralogy suggests, lies beneath the hidden sexuality of their mothers, the one that Elena is introduced to by Lila even before she reads Lonzi.[75] Her brilliant friend is, in fact, also the one who makes the first attempt to engage the narrator in a relational woman-to-woman dialogue after she has published an intimate novel where she describes her first sexual experience.[76] Restoring a relational female gaze in the case of Ferrante's narrators entails dealing with an ambivalence towards their origins that makes them struggle with the conflicting desires of recovering and redeeming their past on the one hand, and dominating and writing the past out of their lives, on the other. Ultimately, similarly to their mothers, Ferrante's protagonists are tangled in a narrative of failed female recognition. They experience an ongoing conflict between the need for raising above women of a similar background and the desire to establish bonds of intersubjectivity with them. Foregrounding this tension, Ferrante expands Cavarero's ethical project to reflect on how the ethical practice of intersubjective signification might be made to work also when working-class women, unlike Amalia and Emilia in *Relating Narratives*, are unable to unite solely on the basis of their sex.[77]

An Intersectional Poetics of Intersubjective Signification

Whereas most of Ferrante's previous novels might be defined as relational autobiographies, the Neapolitan tetralogy fits more closely the description of "relating narrative," namely, a work that is the product of a combination between autobiography and biography because it derives from a storyteller and a narrator's mutual engagement in a process of ontological signification.[78] Indeed, in a recent interview, Cavarero mentioned Ferrante's tetralogy as a fitting example of how concrete relationality can be achieved through the craftsmanship of narrative and the complex architectural representation that is typical of the female art of storytelling.[79] This art, as Cavarero contends elsewhere, "imitates a narrative practice that is already at work in human relations" and restores in female terms what Walter Benjamin—a writer Ferrante also claims to have been inspired by—[80] described as "the ancient experience of narration that configured itself as 'community.'"[81] If the narrator of the tetralogy tells us from the very beginning that what we are about to read is the story of a relationship, "our story," she also comments on how, even when she tries, she cannot disentangle herself from the account of Lila's story to relate that narrative "without passing through myself."[82] In addition, the Neapolitan novels emphasize another important aspect of a "relating narrative," namely, that the storyteller, Lila, is not the friend who lacks literary talent, since as Cavarero says about her, and as she has also suggested about Emilia in *Relating Narratives*, not only is she the first one to narrate her story, but she is also the first one who intuits the link between singular life, friendship, and story.[83] Having comprehended "the impossibility of personally objectifying the material of her own desire,"

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[75] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 281. Ferrante, for instance, draws a comparison between the mother in *Troubling Love*, Amalia, and Lila. See also *Frantumaglia*, 276-78.
[76] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 174-178.
[77] The main example of a "relating narrative" that Cavarero provides is one taken from The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Sexual Difference*, where Amalia answers her friend and companion's desire to have her life story retold. Amalia and Emilia belong to the Northern Italian working class, but the theme of ambivalence is not explored by Cavarero. *Relating Narratives*, 55-59.
[78] Ferrante already explored the *topos* of friendship in *The Lost Daughter*, but through a relational autobiography.
[79] Cavarero, "Interview," 236-249, 240-41.
[80] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 142-145.
[81] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 126.
[82] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 23; *The Story of The Lost Child,* 25.
[83] Cavarero, "Interview," 239; *Relating Narratives*, 56.

the storyteller seeks someone who, "not in her place but for her," will "sketc[h] a figure" where a uniqueness that cannot otherwise be captured because it is "intermittent and fragmentary," can nonetheless "constitut[e] itself in relation."[84] Rather than being a character in search of an author, she seeks a narrator-friend who, after engaging with her in the practice of starting from the self in relation to others, will prevent the storyteller from "letting herself go" by making the "unmasterable design" of her life ontologically tangible and, thus, transformable into an ethics.[85] This description can be applied also to the tetralogy whereby, by writing *their* story, Elena is not letting the unbinding of subjectivity that Lila experiences as *smarginatura* (dissolving boundaries) have the unethical effects that Lila herself fears it might have if, after restoring the subject's entanglement with material reality, she will not "manage to solidify [herself] around any goodwill."[86] After the 1980 earthquake, when Lila, recovering from *smarginatura*, realizes that there is a "solvent that acts slowly… even when there's no earthquake," she herself expresses the desire that Elena not let her go: "with me love doesn't last. … if I insult you … please, don't leave me, or I'll fall in."[87] Elena's relating narrative, as Cavarero contends, is an "extension" of Lila's pages.[88] In fact, Lila's written pages, from the tale of the *Blue Fairy* to the notebooks she entrusts to Elena in 1966 that encompass the storyteller's account of her own life since the end of elementary school, may be physically missing from the tetralogy, or, in the case of the former, are even destroyed by the author herself, to act as a reminder that not only is there an unamendable material reality that precedes the story and has its own unconstrainable and unforming aesthetics, but also that such a reality is inherently intersubjective and, thus, as Ferrante herself has claimed, "it's the other, she who doesn't describe but is described, who has the power to bring it fully to the end."[89] Yet, even in spite of their absence, and of Lila's own disappearing "without leaving a trace," the narration makes it very clear that the narrator's creative effort is not the work of a solitary genius.[90] It is, rather, an effort to generate a narrative universe that can reconstruct the traces of an ontology of Being co-created by two unique subjectivities which might otherwise be erased from politics. Lila is no mere muse; Elena's writing ability is developed in collaboration with hers and is constantly nourished either by her authored works—"her child's book had put down deep roots in my mind"—[91] or through the dialogic encounter or "collision" of their heads. Beginning with her school essay on Dido and her first novel, and up to the entirety of Elena's text in the tetralogy, the narrator either consciously or unconsciously weaves Lila's ideas and words into her own.[92] Just like Elena and Lila's life stories, their creative voices are inscribed one inside the other in a way that maintains the singularity of each voice—we are constantly reminded that Lila is a unique and unassimilable "who"—but blurs the distance between narrator and storyteller. Hence, readers cannot help but distrust the unreliable Elena, whose own internal conflict between the desire for interrelationality and the need for autonomy the tetralogy repeatedly foregrounds, when towards the conclusion she claims that, in spite of her friend's ongoing influence on her writing, "Lila is not in these words."[93] Establishing, as Cavarero states, "a continuous exchange whereby each becomes the narrator of the other woman, real or potential"[94] and where, as de Rogatis claims, a "linguistic and

[84] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 56, 58, 63.
[85] Cavarero, 55, 63.
[86] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 178.
[87] Ferrante, 178.
[88] Cavarero, "Interview," 239
[89] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 311.
[90] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 20.
[91] Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 455.
[92] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 24.
[93] Ferrante*,* 469.
[94] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives,* 60.

symbolic polyphony" challenges both patriarchal and imperialist monologism, the tetralogy develops a narrative thread of relationality that, following Jessica Benjamin's relational theory, reasserts the pre-oedipal condition because the *I* does not dominate, but, rather, recognizes that Other as a particular, embodied subject who is a sovereign equal and an essential co-creator of a reciprocal, and textual in Ferrante's case, space of "thirdness."[95] What further contributes to the creation of a space of thirdness is the narrator's artistic self-awareness, particularly her confession that, in spite of her artistic training in making everything seem "coherent" "with words," she cannot help but confront that, as Lila states, "coherence isn't there."[96] Elena's narration, like Cavarero's "relating narrative," cannot have "at its center a compact and coherent identity" constructed through that distanced, impartial, and ultimately alienating gaze which, from epic to novel, has often acted in complicity with the sexist and imperialistic discourse of a patriarchy that rests on the separation between speaking subjects and spoken-of objects.[97] Rather, it can only help sketch the "intermittent and fragmentary" uniqueness of a relational existence that passes through the narrator's own as well as through the broader chorus of lives in which the two friends are entangled.[98] Like a storyteller who stays "solidly anchored to the street," Lila, the narrator must be a "situated" knower, similar to the one described by Donna Haraway, who trades isolation for the entanglement of community.[99] This is where what Ferrante has described as "the low levels of storytelling," namely, those melodramatic forms, from the 19th century *feuilletton* to *fotoromanzi* (photo romances), that have been designed with a female audience in mind and that the author herself had been trained to deem unworthy of the canon, come to the aid of the two Elenas.[100] Popular fiction provides the tetralogy with a way to follow the anti-novelistic direction that, as the author suggests in *Frantumaglia* and as critics have observed, her writing strives towards in order to perform its intent of transforming *frantumaglia* into a tangible and, thus, ethical form.[101] This direction, in the case of the Neapolitan novels, ultimately leads to the making of an antinovelistic *romanzone,* as Olivia Santovetti has defined it, where Ferrante transports the broken canvas of the avant-garde and the "mimesis of process" of metafiction into a textured narrative pregnant with microhistories, such as those by Elsa Morante.[102] Ultimately, the author creates her own iteration of that female architecture of storytelling that, as Cavarero writes, "makes the intersection of stories proliferate within the tale" to "respon[d] to the relational character of the originary scene through a *mimesis* that is still close to

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[95] Cavarero, "Interview," 239; de Rogatis, *Parole chiave*, 16, 41-46, 56. Benjamin elaborates the concept of thirdness in *Shadow of the Other* and in "Intersubjectivity." Drawing on Homi Bhabha, de Rogatis interprets this thirdness in the tetralogy as the creation of a third-space of liminality that raptures both phallogocentrism and monolithic myths of national belonging. The critic contends that this liminality is reflected also in the tetralogy's linguistic hybridity. While the Neapolitan dialect is mostly absent, it nonetheless reverberates in the neutral Italian prose through insertions, rare outbursts, and para-dialectical rhythms. de Rogatis, *Parole chiave*, 200-208; *Keywords*, 277-79.

[96] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 262. In the opening of *The Story of a New Name*, Elena reflects on how Lila's own notebooks, where the protagonist alternates moments of rhetorical order to moments of disorder, provide an example of how the order of speech is something acquired through what she will later describe as a practice of acculturation. Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 16. This can be read as a commentary on Elena's own narration.

[97] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 63.

[98] Cavarero, 63.

[99] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 139; Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," 590.

[100] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 64, 332.

[101] Ferrante often comments on how her stories of women's disintegration are mirrored by a breaking up of narrative orderliness. See, for instance, *Frantumaglia*, 100-101. On this topic, see Santovetti, "Melodrama or Metafiction"; and Zarour Zarzar, "Bumping into the Novelistic Scaffolding."

[102] In "Melodrama and Metafiction," Santovetti borrows the term *romanzone* from one of many negative assessments that Morante's *La Storia* received when it first came out. Ferrante has received and continues to receive similar negative assessments by Italian critics even after her international success. See Schwartz, "Ferrante Feud." Ferrante often recognizes her debt to Morante in *Frantumaglia.* Linda Hutcheon uses the term "mimesis of process" in *Narcissistic Narrative*.

the practice" and never loses sight of the referent "slid[ing] into the autonomy of the work".[103] The structure of melodrama helps Elena tear down the illusion that either storyteller or narrator are self-enclosed monads rather than an uncontainable, relational and also unpredictable excess. In so doing, the narrator draws nearer that ability of "construct[ing] bridges and not finish[ing] them" which is one of Lila's ways of transposing into words the co-agential ontological experience that finds its matrix in *smarginatura*, a dissolving of margins that the narrator herself underwent after Lila threw her doll in the basement sparking the genesis of their relational narratable identities.[104]

Yet, while the tetralogy undoubtedly shares several traits with Cavarero's feminist ethics of narration and might even provide a fitting example of how such an ethics might be transformed into textual practice, it also brings to the surface the unsaid of many "relating narratives." And, in doing so, it constructs a paradigm of relationality that is more suitable for a transnational context, the contemporary one, where feminism, even in countries that were until recently more ethnically and racially homogenous, such as Italy, can no longer fail to directly address the overlapping differences that define female experiences. The ambivalent feelings that Elena and Lila have for one another foreground the unresolved tension between the need for self-assertion and the desire for interconnection that lies beneath the practice of intersubjective signification and that as Lorde, and Lugones building on her, have shown, might be further emphasized within the context of multiple difference. When discussing the relationship between the narrator and the storyteller of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena*, Cavarero hints at the risk that a "relating narrative" might reproduce an old dynamic of domination and submission between a narrator who is in a position of privilege and a storyteller who is not. This risk, in the case of *The Long Journey*, entails both "cultural colonization" and "instrumental appropriation," considering the colonial context of the work.[105] Delving into a similar dynamics within the Italian sociohistorical context—the country's unification often being interpreted as a form of internal colonialism—while also further complicating it by including a narrator whose privilege is the result of social mobility, migration, and hegemonic acculturation, the Neapolitan novels openly address the challenges of transposing a female friendship sprung in a context of multiple inequalities into a narrative that seeks to promote a relational ethics. Throughout the tetralogy we are reminded that in her dual quest to redeem her sex and her origins through artistic affirmation, Elena the writer is not immune from the risk of either colonizing or instrumentally appropriating the experience of a storyteller who does not—or does not entirely, in the case of Lila—share her privilege. This is especially the case considering that the storyteller in question, Lila, not only does not openly express the desire to be narrated, but even forbids the narrator to make the life of a "scribble" into a form that, as she suspects, might try to bind her into fictional restraints that reproduce the same dynamics of domination as the world. Elena's destruction of Lila's notebooks in the second installment of the tetralogy and her confession, in *The Story of the Lost Child*, that she does not want the barely literate friend to write a novel about their life that might outdo hers are two of the most telling examples of the narrator's struggle to engage in a "relating narrative" where there must always be a desire for reciprocity between narrator and storyteller.[106] Likewise, in addition to exposing and

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[103] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 127.

[104] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 169; *My Brilliant Friend,* 57. Both Ferrara and Pinto read Ferrante's writing using Barad's post-human definition of "agential" or intra-acting realism. de Rogatis also weaves Barad's theory into her argument about Ferrante's "uncanny underground realism." Ferrara, "Performative Realism and Post-Humanism"; Pinto, *Elena Ferrante: Poetiche e Politiche*; de Rogatis, *Keywords*, 282-83.

[105] Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 64-65. Laurie Naranch has also argued that Cavarero does not sufficiently expand on the issue of instrumentalization. Naranch, "The Narratable Self."

[106] "I had always overestimated her, nothing memorable would emerge from her something that reassured me and upset me. I loved Lila, I wanted her to last. But I wanted it to be I who made her last. I thought it was my task. I was convinced that she herself, as a girl, had assigned it to me." Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 463.

problematizing Elena's authorial privilege, these examples also serve to further develop an awareness, the realization that a colonial dynamics might be at work in gender relations, which Lugones, and Lorde before her, have described as essential to construct "a new subject of a new geopolitics of knowing and loving."[107]

When they are children, Lila and Elena establish the premise for developing the alternative political space of a narrative relation.[108] Their mutual desire for reinventing their world together, which sparks, alongside the dream of artistic collaboration, after they read together the book that Lila buys with the money they get from the local loan shark, *Little Women*, enables the two friends to restore intersubjectivity, and make up for the lack of recognition that each one receives from their mother. As Christine Maksimowicz argues, projecting "the psychic effect of classed deprivation and injury … upon [their daughters]," the neighborhood's mothers, who find a perfect embodiment not only in Immacolata Greco's altered physical appearance but also in her actions—from the careless behavior during Elena's growing into a woman that makes the narrator feel "superfluous," to the constant supporting and hindering of her sociocultural mobility and emancipation—impede the development of a pre-oedipal female sense of self as "self-in-relation."[109] Nonetheless, as Maksimowicz contends, in spite of their early attempts to resolve the discourse of failed interrelationality through narrative collaboration, Lila and Elena end up being caught in the tangle of their origins. The intersection of gender and class further complicates the relationship between Elena and the other brilliant friend after the narrator alone is granted the privilege to realize the shared dream of having *a room of one's own*. Unable to shake her resentment, Lila will repeatedly criticize Elena's work while forbidding her to write about their story. In addition, she will also cut Elena out of her quest to change a social reality, that of the neighborhood, that, in Lila's opinion, becomes too crude for the friend who reeducates herself to become a "parrots' parrot."[110] Having acquired the idiom of the privileged—first the Galianis in Naples and, then, the Airotas in Northern Italy—Elena, in Lila's mind but also in the eyes of the local youth who engage directly in the sixties and seventies struggles, can only succeed in colonizing the identity of her childhood friends into the abstract and gender-blind notion of working-class, or in patronizing them, by "mobilizing the good friends of the owners" to help them.[111] For her part, Elena ends up reciprocating Lila's attempts to erase the other. After being excluded from a plan of emancipation in which she thinks she "could have been useful, participated," criticized for addressing the same topic in a book where she connects Florence and Naples to provide a more inclusive portrayal of the violence that links the post-war period with the 1970s, and, then, also mocked for attempting to draw Lila into feminist readings, the narrator decides that she has to find who she is "outside" the influence of her friend.[112]

Within the diegetic context of the tetralogy, Lila and Elena do not realize in a sustaining manner the project of redeeming themselves through their dream of artistic collaboration, or a sisterhood similar to the one represented in Alcott's novel. Nonetheless, prompted by Lila's "goad," namely, the desire to complete their project of redemption that Lila, in my view, deliberately arouses by disappearing, Elena tries to retroactively restore the narrative bond she had established with Lila in childhood. Elena's exploration of the ambivalent connection between herself and Lila is an attempt

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[107] Lugones, "Towards a Decolonial Feminism," 756.

[108] "There was something unbearable in the things, in the people, in the buildings, in the streets that, only if you reinvented it all, as in a game, became acceptable. The essential, however, was to know how to play, and she and I, only she and I, knew how to do it." Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 106-7.

[109] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 44; Maksimowicz, "Maternal Failure and its Bequest."

[110] Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 162-63.

[111] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 121-24, 221-22.

[112] Ferrante*,* 314, 272, 282-83.

to engage in the reflective "eye to eye" work which, according to Lorde, is essential in order to prevent not only the outside but also the internalized oppressor from hindering the development of female alliances across differences. In this sense, one might argue that Ferrante takes Cavarero's project to reverse the patriarchal ontological script of western civilization a step further also by finding the traces of an alternative discourse of kinship which might readmit women into politics while more convincingly separating the discourse of friendship from that of homosocial sameness. If, as both Cavarero and Ferrante suggest, the classics have often left behind evidence of their matricide, one might argue that Ferrante takes inspiration from one of those alternative notions of kinship that, as Schweitzer contends, were dismissed to favor the discourse of friendship supported by the *polis*.[113] In her post-colonial study of "affective relationality" inspired by Derrida's *The Politics of Friendship*, Leela Gandhi, for instance, argues that the Epicurean notion of *philoxenia*, or guest-friendship, which was set aside to favor Aristotle's concept of ideal *philia*, could be used as the lens through which we might interpret the bonds of affinities and anti-imperialist alliances that some individuals or groups in the West have formed with the victims of their own expansionist cultures.[114] While Ferrante does not develop a broad anti-colonial critique, her work nonetheless exposes the rhetoric of colonization which is embedded in the ongoing discourse of patriarchy and often affects female relations, trapping women in the same type of primordial male labyrinth from which, as Stiliana Milkova contends, the author's heroines seek to find a way out through the emancipatory practice of female collaboration.[115] Lugones herself has suggested that such unveiling and resisting of the coloniality of gender must be done starting from home, namely, by coming to terms with the arrogance towards those mothers whom unprivileged women learned to love and abuse at the same time.[116] This filial arrogance, Lugones contends, is reproduced and emphasized when unprivileged women deal with different others who are independent from them, unless, beginning with their mothers, and, as Ferrante suggests, also with close ones, they try to travel to the other's "world" and engage in a non-assimilatory dialogue that builds a mutual understanding without which "we are not intelligible" and cannot "*be* through *loving* each other."[117] Receptive to a decolonial model of "thinking against" to which, as Elena admits, she had been introduced by the semi-literate friend who first put a different spin on her own and on another woman's story before she read Carla Lonzi,[118] the narrator attempts to engage in the type of "world" travel described by Lugones whose outcome must be both self-reconstruction and the construction of worlds where multipositional subjectivities can deeply connect and creatively co-inhabit difference.[119] This "world" travel inspired by the awareness, "unlearning," and recomposition that Elena experiences thanks to Lonzi and Lila is what, as Glynn contends, ultimately changes the narrator's perspective on her city, whereby, by the end the novel, Elena comes to challenge the Orientalizing perspective through which Southern Italian identity has conventionally been interpreted as uncivilized and "female-like" by the Northern European élites and a national intellectual tradition, those of *meridionalisti* (Southern Question theorists), that either bought into the same logic of

[113] Schweitzer, "Making Equals."
[114] Gandhi, *Affective Communities*. See also Schweitzer on Gandhi in Schweitzer, "Making Equals," 338-339, 343, 364.
[115] Milkova, "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna." See also de Rogatis, *Keywords*, 291.
[116] Lugones, "Playfulness."
[117] Lugones, "Playfulness," 8.
[118] I am referring to Lila's rewriting of Dido's story and the constant unforming of her identity through which this character transforms the experience of *smarginatura* into a politics of creative resistance. The tetralogy's reference to Lonzi's decolonial thinking ("Deculturate. Disacculturate… Get rid of the master-slave dialectic …") is in Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 280-82.
[119] Lugones "Playfulness," 17.

modernization or indirectly or unconsciously applied a similar hegemonic perspective.[120] In addition, it also hints at the possibility that, as Lorde has claimed to expand her ideas about black women to include other singularities oppressed by the neoliberal profit economy, local ways of relating across difference might inspire the creation of broader communities of resistance whose members join forces in the quest for a more inclusive collective empowerment.[121] As Alessia Ricciardi argues, Lila's symbolic mediation enables her and Elena to develop a "mutual entrustment" that offers a corrective to the problem of subalternity which was theorized by Antonio Gramsci and later developed by postcolonial feminist thinkers such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; the Neapolitan heroines cast "reciprocal acts of friendship" as decolonizing practices that create alternative orders which "do not aim at" and, thus, resist and expose the faulty logic of "capitalist gains of wealth, legal vindication of rights or metaphysical proofs of knowledge."[122]

The Neapolitan novels foreground the decolonizing aim of Ferrante's mythopoetics in particular through the interweaving of the story of the two brilliant friends with that plot, Dido's tragedy, that first instilled in the author the desire to rewrite tradition which she would then transmit to her storytellers.[123] In Book IV of the *Aeneid*, the altruistic desire for community that is also clearly reflected in the heroine's wish to travel to the "world" of a different other, namely, her own *philoxenia*, leads the African queen to create a city more just than the one where her brother killed her husband to take possession of his riches. Yet, Dido's project comes to a halt due to the unrequited love for the very same foreign guest that she has welcomed into her home. Reweaving ancient epic into an "informed architecture" of female storytelling, the tetralogy follows the protagonists' quest to develop the queen's original project to reinvent the fabric of society through affective relationality.[124] Just like the unrealized but forthcoming city of women that Ferrante describes in *Frantumaglia*, instead of constructing an artificially harmonious concept of feminine community, this *polis* must confront female ambivalence to find possible ways in which to realize Dido's goal of developing a collective identity that is no longer based on the individualism that is at the root of economic and political oppression.[125] As Lila comments in the first volume of *My Brilliant Friend*, planting the seeds that will inspire Elena to reinterpret the *Aeneid* in her first major writing projects, it is a lack of recognition of one by a close other, like the one experienced by Dido, that turns the life of both people and cities sterile.[126] This lack of recognition, or unrequited love in the specific case of Dido, is what, in the words of Ferrante the author, turns the queen who "welcomes the foreign exile" and takes care that "the walls of the temple of Juno, goddess of marriage and childbirth, should display the horrors of war and murder," into the blood-thirsty woman who will ultimately undo her own city by seeking death and the promise of future conflict among people and cultures.[127] Inspired by Dido's initial quest to stop the cycle of patriarchal violence, a cycle that the protagonists reinterpret as the chronological flow of that time "*before us*" that informs the perennial subalternity of their neighborhood, the retroactive

[120] Glynn argues that Elena's perspective on Naples begins with the stereotypes of the postcard city that are reinforced by her father, continues with the negative perspective and fear of regression that the narrator develops while living in the North, and ends when, questioning the northern gaze, she reads Naples no longer as a primitive body but as a lens through which one should read the logic of modernization of the West. Glynn, "Decolonizing the Body of Naples."
[121] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 114-123.
[122] Alessia Ricciardi points out how, in the original Italian version, Ferrante's tetralogy repeatedly uses variants of the word "subaltern." This, in the critic's view, clearly denotes Ferrante's intention to create a feminist space where the subaltern is granted cultural authority. Ricciardi, "Can the Subaltern Speak in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?," 310, 293-4.
[123] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 147-153.
[124] This is another way Cavarero describes women's as well as Ferrante's writing. Cavarero, "Interview," 241.
[125] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 151-153.
[126] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 160.
[127] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 150.

narration of Elena and Lila's friendship aims to develop a bond of reciprocal recognition that will allow the protagonists to watch over what Ferrante has defined as a female "specificity."[128] Together, the "double Ariadne" of the tetralogy must develop the creative self-vigilance that can protect a woman's ability to "expand" herself into an interrelated subjectivity and resist the erasure of the symbolic meanings that are inscribed upon the gendered body—what Luisa Muraro has defined a "symbolic order of the mother"—but are written over by the signs of the death-oriented Universal subject of patriarchy.[129] Likewise, they must also develop an ability to resist those additional traumas generated by failed bonds of reciprocity that, as in Dido's case, might bring them back inside old borders, preventing the foundation of a "*polis* of love." Ultimately, my contention is that Elena's narrative generates the awareness that while she and Lila, due to their origins, fail to realize a traditional model of sisterhood, they can nonetheless develop an alternative bond of "solidarity" similar to the one that Ferrante has described as a possible "antidote … to the furies" and the "impulse to annihilate the enemy" which can stop the creation of alternative communities.[130] This bond of solidarity is essential to enable the protagonists to continue fighting against the ongoing oppression that affects both a neighborhood and a city, theirs, which, as Elena comes to realize after living and travelling North, are affected by the same logic of domination that operates in the global patriarchal *polis*. Instead of being rooted in a presumed Southern backwardness, individualism, and amorality, such patriarchal logic is, in fact, an expression of that "dream of unlimited progress" and "faith in technology, in science, in economic development" from which the South has been deemed excluded but which, in fact, is itself the true "nightmare of savagery and death" that has been imposed on the various Souths of the world.[131]

In volume three of the tetralogy, after encountering Lonzi's feminism of difference and recognizing the disempowering effects produced by the solitude of women's minds, Elena speculates on what her and Lila's life may have been if they had been given the chance of studying together. Had they both been granted the same opportunities, the two brilliant friends, in the narrator's view, might have been able to overcome the ambivalence that makes people in their neighborhood "greed[y]," "bitter," and "angry," and that has made Lila resentful and suspicious of the cultured friend who left, and Elena equally resentful and also jealous of the raw talent and uncolonized voice of the girlfriend who stayed behind.[132] The inability to feel at ease with one another ultimately prevents the two friends from becoming allies in either the fight against gender oppression or the one against the other inequalities that the postwar political climate, and the consequent development of advanced and neoliberal capitalism, have expanded both within and outside the neighborhood. As a result of their ambivalence towards one another the two brilliant friends, as Elena states, were unable to give each other "new depth, body" as they moved into adulthood and ultimately became "for each other abstract entities."[133] If instead Elena and Lila "had both taken the test for admission to middle school and then high school," not only would they have learned to share "the pleasure of understanding and the imagination," but, as Elena writes, they "would have [also] drawn power from each other" and "fought shoulder to shoulder."[134] In other words, according to Elena, eliminating difference might have allowed her and Lila to achieve that dual project of redeeming their sex and their city that they had first undertaken as children upon realizing the true connection that exists between woman and *polis*.

[128] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend*, 36, 160-63.
[129] The definition of double Ariadne comes from Milkova's "Il Minotauro e la doppia Arianna."
[130] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 151.
[131] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child*, 337.
[132] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 227-8.
[133] Ferrante, 315.
[134] Ferrante, 354.

Dido's tragedy and the undoing of Carthage are products of the exile of love that results from excluding gender difference from the discourse of communal identity, an exile that is visible in the sterile doom of the ancient *polis* as well as in the "dirty streets… the country disfigured by new buildings, and the violence in every house" of the neighborhood, and in "Italy under Fascism, Germany under Nazism, all of us human beings in the world today."[135]

One can continue to speculate what Elena and Lila might have accomplished if they had managed to erase difference. Yet, ultimately, it is a different *what if* that readers of the Neapolitan novels are prompted to focus on. This *what if* relates to a scenario that we encounter in the last volume of the tetralogy when Elena and Lila develop a sense of "solidarity" that, at least for a while, keeps "ill feelings … in check" and, to use the Lorde's words, provides a hint as to how we might "identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across difference."[136] This is one of the few times when Elena's textual construction of relationality provides readers also with a factual example of how the adult protagonists may have succeeded in creating what Lugones has described as the "fractured locus" of a "feminist border thinking," a locus where non-essentializing positions of equality can emerge that create co-habitations of difference and forms of sociality antithetical to the logic of capital, disrupting, as de Rogatis contends in relation to Ferrante's storytelling, the current "return to the old order of nationalism, identity politics, misogyny and racist fundamentalism."[137] In the last volume of the tetralogy, running away from oppressive relationships with educated males such as her bourgeois Northern Italian husband, Pietro Airota, and her former childhood sweetheart, Nino Sarratore, who have only further attempted to mold her into shapes agreeable to patriarchy, Elena continues her quest to "expan[d] beyond boundaries" through a journey that takes her back first to Naples, and then, once the "sharp separation" she established with her past becomes "a residue of more fragile periods of [her] life," also to the neighborhood.[138] Even though, as the narrator tells us, Lila is still reluctant to engage in an awareness-raising dialogue with "the one who … even though [she] had returned, now had another view… could not be fully welcomed back," she becomes the main facilitator of Elena's reintegration, particularly after the narrator leaves upper-class Naples and returns to the neighborhood.[139] Likewise, that friend's "gaze" that mediates Elena's reentry into the world of the neighborhood also enables the "experiment in recomposition" that the narrator now comes to perceive as crucial to redefining selfhood.[140] Emerging from her meanness, as we are told, Lila brings Elena's daughters closer to a mother who, in their eyes, has not only betrayed their father but also denied them the privilege of a bourgeois family. Instilling in Dede and Elsa that, in spite of their last name they "came out of [their mother's] stomach," Lila makes not only acceptable but also interesting in their eyes both the family of choice that Elena trades for an oppressive marriage and also the "funny live doll" that their mother made with another man.[141] In spite "of the thousands of odious things [they have] gone through," Elena cannot help but let her own "solidarity regain force,"[142] prompted also by a renewed awareness that Lila's meanness as her friend herself will suggest when defining her experience of *smarginatura*, is in the end only a defensive mechanism, a way to deal with the *vulnus* of one's origins.[143] The narrator comes to the conclusion that she would be truly mutilated only if she continued her quest for redemption "outside" of Lila.

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[135] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 160, 188.
[136] The first quotation comes from Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 138-9; the second from Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 123.
[137] Lugones, "Decolonial Feminism;" de Rogatis, *Keywords,* 291.
[138] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 26, 197.
[139] Ferrante, 158-59.
[140] Ferrante, 271, 262.
[141] Ferrante, 136, 141.
[142] Ferrante, 138.
[143] Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 164; *The Story of The Lost Child,* 178-79.

Being pregnant together further enhances the sense of mutual solidarity that Elena and Lila develop for one another. Without mystifying maternity, which, as Katrin Wehling-Giorgi has demonstrated, is another crucial aspect of Ferrante's poetics of subaltern resistance, their pregnancies not only rekindle the protagonists' "affection" for one another but also help them overcome that matrophobia symbolized by their dropping each other's dolls in the basement as children.[144] This symbolic return to a maternal/material *continuum* is witnessed through Lila and Elena's choice to use their unmarried names at the obstetrician's office as well as by their decision to name their daughters after both their mothers and the dolls that bore a version of their mothers' name. An act of reparation, similar to the one that also literally takes place between Elena and a dying mother with whom she can finally exchange intimate confidences, seems essential to ensure that Elena and Lila instead of "*giv*[*ing*]" their children to the symbolic order of man, as Lonzi has stated and as is also reported in the tetralogy, facilitate their own and their children's identification with a different form of being and belonging.[145] Yet, it is mostly after Imma and Tina are born that Elena and Lila, borrowing Cavarero's words, show how a "home of the living where meaning is returned to being born of woman" can become a laboratory from which we can imagine "another *polis*."[146] When, after Nino's betrayal, Elena moves back to the neighborhood a single mother, she and Lila become their family's two "mammas;" they create an affective bond that offers a corrective to both the discourse of the patriarchal family and the colonial logic of hegemony and subalternity that is embedded in such discourse.[147] Mutual support enables Elena for the first time ever to resume her activity as a writer almost immediately after giving birth. Lila, for her part, gains Elena's support in helping her daughter, Tina, resist the process of manipulation of female identity into cancellation that is visible in the broken identities and bodies of many women in their neighborhood. Yet, rather than merely helping each other survive, which would reassert an ethics of nurturing rooted in the old stereotype that "female friendship is based above all on the solidarity of misery and oppression," Lila and Elena draw power from each other also in more creative ways.[148] They develop a kinship that, as Cavarero contends in *Relating Narratives*, precisely because it has "conspicuous narrative characteristics" is also political in that it creates a rupture in the logocentric discourse of the *polis* which allows for a different symbolic to emerge as the subject of politics and, thus, as Ricciardi contends, for an alternative cultural space rooted in feminism to arise where the subaltern might begin to articulate their divergent perspective.[149] Being back with Lila enables Elena to hear the world through the voice of the friend who stayed while resisting her defensive manipulation. Both things allow her to refine and complete that book on Naples and Florence, which she had put aside particularly because of Lila's criticism and seems to become an important step in the narrator's development of a style that will give those origins that dragged her down a "shape" that will not merely help her climb higher but will also "[redeem] them" "for myself,

144 Wehling-Giorgi argues that Ferrante's desecration and dislocation of the maternal body resists subalternity by challenging a male-focalized gaze and asserting a liminal, female one. Wehling-Giorgi, "Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels" and "Playing with the Maternal Body." Maksimowicz explains how, in psychoanalysis, being dropped can be interpreted as the lack of a reflective gaze that would nurture a child's emerging being. Maksimowicz, "Maternal Failure," 212.

145 Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 280. de Rogatis applies Melanie Klein's discussion on reparation also to her reading of the tetralogy. de Rogatis, *Parole Chiave*, 100, 113-121.

146 Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 85.

147 Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 287.

148 Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 78.

149 Cavarero, 58. Ricciardi writes: "Elena and Lila … exemplify a more radical hope for emancipation. Neither of Ferrante's protagonists is able in the course of their story to fully achieve this ideal, and neither pursues it without lasting personal costs. Yet the aspiration itself remains their lifelong common bond. What the two friends share in the end is a desire for nothing less than new social roles and creative means, new ways of living and being." Ricciardi, "Can the Subaltern Speak in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels?," 310.

for Lila, for whomever."[150] For her part, a renewed solidarity towards the friend who left not only enables Lila to put aside cruelty but also rekindles her desire to "change the neighborhood" in co-authorship with Elena.[151] Lila and Elena achieve this goal by collaborating on a writing project that resembles the one where, using Lila's experience, they had previously exposed working conditions in the sausage factory where she worked. Elena and Lila's heads "collid[e] … one against the other, and merg[e] one more time" while they use the Solara matriarch's red book to write a piece that Lila very much hopes will give a final blow to the *camorrista* family whose ties with both money and political power have made them the main source of livelihood and death in the neighborhood.[152] This would help accomplish a goal that, after she was unable to join Elena in sociocultural climbing, Lila had been working towards through the unmaking and remaking of her identity: first, by designing shoes with the financial support of a future husband whom she wrongly believed to be immune from complicity with patriarchal and mafioso power, and, then, by escaping the last name of Carracci, to become, in turn, co-creator, with Elena, of her own avant-gardist "self-destruction *in an image*," factory worker and protestor against sexually abusive and mafia-colluded owners, and, finally, alongside her former bully turned workers' movement leader, the greengrocer's son Enzo, both owner of a computer business that offers locals a legal source of employment and partner in a relationship that departs from normative models, showing that heterosexual love can be lived more ethically.[153] As Elena claims, turning the disorder of her mind into new ethical orders, Lila went from being a wicked girl into a sort of "oracle" for her community.[154] Nevertheless, Lila's way of achieving redemption, just like that solitary quest for emancipation that seems to always lead Elena in the arms of dominating men, is not immune from creating new bonds of oppression. Lila and Enzo have turned into a new version of the owners they despised; not only are they protagonists of an immaterial economy that produces new forms of exploitation but they also continue to rely on old forms of violence to conduct business with bad costumers. The narration suggests that in order to formulate ways of being that are outside the master-slave logic it is essential that Elena and Lila reunite and resume that process of "reinvent[ing] it all" that they had started when they began drafting their narrative friendship as children; they must become "guardian … divinities at times in agreement, at times in competition, but in any case attentive to their [community's] problems."[155]

What if the disappearance of Lila's daughter, Tina, a clear retaliation against Elena and Lila's new attempt to stop the flow of the time "*before us*," did not interrupt the development of the protagonists' newfound solidarity into a lasting transformative bond? This is an open question that the readers of the tetralogy are left to ponder, their lack of gratification being an indication that the fight is still far from over and, thus, a plot, as Ferrante herself suggests, must instill a desire to act on the referent by "disappoint[ing] the usual expectations and inspir[ing] new ones."[156] Unable to process the trauma of losing Tina, Lila, as we are told, develops "bitter[ness] toward everything that … grows and prospers" including towards those creative, familial, and narrative realities that she has established

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[150] Ferrante, *Story of the Lost Child,* 260. In the original Italian version, Ferrante uses the verb "*riscattare*" (to redeem). The English translation, however, uses "taking revenge." Ferrante, *Storia della bambina perduta*, 244.
[151] Ferrante*, Story of the Lost Child,* 267.
[152] Ferrante, 312.
[153] With Elena's help Lila turns her wedding photo from a visual marker of the commodification of her body performed by an abusive husband who, with her family's consent, uses her to make a business deal with the *camorra* into an anti-figurative collage that stands as an antipatriarchal symbol. Ferrante, *The Story of a New Name,* 123. On Ferrante's visual poetics and her use of ekphrasis as a strategy to challenge the objectifying, vertical and eroticizing male gaze typical of the patriarchal figurative tradition see Milkova, "Elena Ferrante's Visual Poetics."
[154] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 272.
[155] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 103, 106-7; *The Story of the Lost Child,* 213.
[156] Ferrante, *Frantumaglia,* 269.

with Elena and that provide a glimpse into new ethical orders.[157] The protagonist's fear that, as a consequence of loss, the unbinding of *smarginatura* may keep her from "solidify[ing] [herself] around any goodwill" and lead her to hurt those whom she loves, may be what prompts her to enact one last time her "aesthetic project" of eliminating herself.[158] Yet, one might argue that writing herself entirely out of the frame is not only Lila's final act of resistance against a world that attempts to recast her in the role of *femina furens*, "a madwoman who spread[s] terror."[159] Rather, it is also her way of prompting Elena to interpret her friend's unspoken, or not so clearly spoken, desire for a thread of orientation that might make it possible for an ethics to emerge from the elaboration of the experience of disintegration in the form of a story that helps women resist being taken from a place of common belonging where they can prevent that "not only the life of the people becom[e] sterile but the life of cities."[160] Lila is certainly aware that Elena's resentment for her disappearance, combined with what the narrator self-consciously defines as her own and a typical writer's "presumption," will spark her desire to be defiant and break once again the promise of never writing about her friend.[161] This time, however, one cannot help but think that it is Lila who wants Elena to not let her friend entirely "fall in," so that the two of them can continue developing their narrative friendship by engaging in the process of "examin[ing] our connection with … inflexibility … tell[ing] each other fully what we had been silent about" in which each one had attempted to involve the other though at different times:[162] Lila before Elena encountered feminism and developed the ability to reciprocate her friend's confessions with similar confidences, and Elena when Lila deemed that a feminist vocabulary was too removed from the reality of her experience, even though, if familiarized with its basic concepts, as the narrator claims, she "would [have] surely know[n] how to take on better than all of us."[163] Building on the decolonizing awareness that Elena acquired through her experience with feminism and that, with Lila's help, she expanded upon to recompose the multipositionality of her subjectivity, she finally finds the words to engage in dialogue with her friend.[164] Overcoming the essentializing logic of a previous, linear novel that had prompted Lila to stop talking to her, *A Friendship*, Elena incorporates Lila's dissolving margins into a work where both storyteller and narrator are enmeshed in the complex fabric of a relational life story that "inclines towards obscurity, not clarity."[165] Yet, unfinished as it is, the narrative space of the tetralogy helps Elena and Lila thread the tangle of needs and furies which, as Lorde contends, must be confronted if we are to reestablish "interdependency between women" as "the way to a freedom that allows the *I* to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative," that is, by enabling a "descent into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future" that demonstrate how differences can be made into strengths.[166] By having Elena and Lila retrospectively address each other's eyes, the Neapolitan novels give the protagonists another opportunity to realize the transformative potential of their genius. Their intersectional relating narrative helps readers imagine a world in which women, even across multiple differences, can learn to negotiate the distance that keeps them from becoming, in the words of Adrianne Rich, "the presiding genius of [their] body" and "truly create new life bringing forth not only children (if and as we choose) but visions, and the

[157] Ferrante, *The Story of the Lost Child,* 411.
[158] Ferrante, 178, 455, 453.
[159] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 346.
[160] Ferrante, *My Brilliant Friend,* 160.
[161] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 463.
[162] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 178; *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay,* 282.
[163] Ferrante, *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, 174-77, 282, 304-05.
[164] Ferrante, 175.
[165] Ferrante, *The Story of The Lost Child,* 473.
[166] Lorde, *Sister Outsider,* 163, 111-112.

thinking, necessary to sustain, console, and alter human existence—a new relationship to the universe."[167]

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