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Unspeakable Things Spoken: Transgenerational Trauma, Fractured Bodies and Visual Tropes in Toni Morrison, Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante's Works

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes to investigate a transnational lineage of female-authored trauma narratives that centre on how overarching power structures affect the lives of women. My line of inquiry traces the legacy of transgenerational and socially transmissible trauma through the maternal protagonists in the works of Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Elsa Morante (*History: A Novel*) and Elena Ferrante (Neapolitan Novels). In a comparative reading underpinned by Rothberg's notion of the multidirectional negotiation of cultural memory, I identify a series of tropes in the authors' works that effectively articulate trauma. These include the figures of spectral returns and ghosts, nondiscursive signs and images and other linguistic and structural disarticulations, which all serve to challenge and indeed recodify a dominant master discourse. Ultimately, I show that all three authors' works powerfully intercept and translate the spectral (hi)stories of diverse settings of violence and trauma whilst engaging in a multidirectional, dynamic and transnational dialogue.

KEYWORDS

Toni Morrison; Elsa Morante; Elena Ferrante; transgenerational trauma; maternal bodies

'Certain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that [...] art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination' (Morrison, Spivak and Te Awekotuku 2005, 717). As one of the foremost scribes of the atrocities of the slave trade, Toni Morrison has powerfully shown how literature and the arts provide a particularly productive outlet for the narrative negotiation of individual and collective trauma. In fact, since the inception of trauma studies in the 1990s, scholars have highlighted the relevance of the cultural, structural and temporal elements of trauma to the study of literature (Calvo and Nadal 2014; Eyerman 2019; Kurtz 2018; Whitehead 2004), with the genre posited as a privileged art form that can capture the complex temporalities and disarticulations of trauma (Luckhurst 2008, 81).

While trauma was initially taken to emerge from a single, originating, and unspeakable event (Caruth 1996), feminist, postcolonial and cultural trauma theory have shown that these prevalently Eurocentric models 'fall short when attempting to address the lived experience of trauma in other historical and cultural contexts' (Kruger 2018), especially

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when affecting the members of a community (Craps 2013; Rothberg 2014; Yusin 2017). There are in fact plenty of historical examples in which trauma is intergenerationally transmitted or insidiously engrained in society's power structures, with ethnic minorities, Holocaust survivors and individuals of lower social extraction amongst the communities particularly exposed to the intergenerational, cumulative effects of trauma (Root 1992, 240–241).

This article proposes to investigate a transnational lineage of female-authored trauma narratives that all centre on the 'dissymmetries of power that impact on women's lives' (Boehmer 2005, 191). My line of inquiry traces the legacy of female-focalized transgenerational trauma through the fictional portrayals of the women protagonists in the works of three writers of global relevance: Toni Morrison's textual negotiation of the legacy of slavery in *Beloved* ([1987] 2005), Elsa Morante's fictionalization of the trauma of WWII and the Holocaust in *History: A Novel* (1974), and Elena Ferrante's so-called Neapolitan Novels (2011), a literary quartet centred on the trauma elicited by insidious patriarchal violence. Particular poignancy in these texts is afforded to how the female protagonists, all of whom are or become mothers, emerge as acutely vulnerable to structural violence and systematic erasure in a patriarchal system, further heightened still in the context of slavery that denies even the most basic rights to women and mothers.¹ In this context, the liminal maternal body and its fractured topography emerge as a privileged site for articulating individual and collective trauma that is multiply entangled with the violent power structures they have to contend with.

Considering the widely diverging historico-cultural context of Morrison's text (set in the second half of the nineteenth century in Ohio, US) on the one hand and Morante and Ferrante's writings (set during and after WWII in Italy) on the other, what I am proposing is not a 'competing' reading of the memories of historical traumata in question. Rather, building on Rothberg's productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory, I aim to provide a constructive comparative analysis of how the authors position and foreground the female characters' diverse enmeshment in overarching power structures. A reading of these trauma narratives through Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory as an ongoing negotiation and an intercultural approach that 'draw[s] attention to the dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance' (Rothberg 2009, 11) will in fact allow me to draw some productive comparisons between the female subjects at the centre of these traumatic events without foregoing their historical specificity. The comparative perspective reveals itself as particularly constructive as the postcolonial critical framework and its insights into dissymmetries of power and transnational histories that informs many readings of Morrison's works can help us throw further light on elements central to all three authors' works: the texts' wounded (bodily and spatial) topographies, their hybrid identities and the alternative, nondiscursive semiotic codes that challenge the relevant master discourse.

In what follows, I will first outline what qualifies the works of Morrison, Morante and Ferrante as trauma narratives, detailing the negotiation of transgenerational, matrilineal and individual trauma portrayed. In my text-specific reading of trauma, then, I will focus on two recurring motifs common to the three authors' texts:

- (1) How the fictionalization of traumatic experience often privileges the visual/imagistic dimension in the works of Morrison, Morante and Ferrante
- (2) How the liminal maternal body that lies at the centre of their texts emerges as disabled, marked or scarred, providing a physiological correlative around which trauma rotates

1. Three Trauma Narratives: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Elsa Morante's *History: A Novel*, and Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels

1.1. Toni Morrison: Visualizing Transgenerational Trauma and the Scarred Maternal Body in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison has been widely credited with being one of the central literary voices of the violent history of slavery and of enduring racial and gender-related injustices in American society and beyond, with her works emerging as a significant voice against a backdrop of what she refers to as a 'national amnesia' (1989). Morrison's *Beloved* can be considered the apex of the author's lifelong ambition to address the invisibility of black people's lives. Privileging elements of oral history and magic realism (Koenen 1999) that invite parallels with the fantastic elements of Morante and Ferrante's female counternarratives of history (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021), *Beloved* examines the destructive legacy of slavery as it chronicles the life of the fugitive young mother and former slave Sethe from the pre-Civil War period (1855) in Kentucky to the narrative present in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1874.² Having taken on great risks to be reunited with her children, Sethe takes the impossible decision to murder her young daughter rather than return to the locus of slavery when her former slaveowner comes back to reclaim her together with her offspring. Based on the true story of Margaret Garner,³ a slave who resorted to infanticide to prevent her child from living the life of a slave, the novel stages the return of the ghost of the murdered daughter whilst illustrating how Sethe continues to be held prisoner by memories of the trauma of the endemic abuse suffered during her life as a slave that in many ways paved the path to her decision to commit the unspeakable deed.

The eponymous ghost (Beloved), a haunting figure that constitutes a recurring trope also in Ferrante's (and, arguably, also in Morante's texts with the 'spectral' figure of Vilma) writings, becomes the central character in the book as it signals both the recuperation of a systematically silenced history and the emblem of how to represent the dissociative quality of 'extreme trauma' (Bouson 2000, 152) in fiction. Morrison's *Beloved* has in fact often been considered a paradigmatic and in many ways foundational text for the study of trauma in literature as it 'helped establish some of the basic narrative and tropological conventions of trauma fiction' (Luckhurst 2008, 90). In its disarticulation of linear narrative, the trope of the ghost and the reflections on transgenerational transmission of trauma (specifically projected into the mother-child duo), the novel constitutes an *Urtext* in trauma fiction that has left an indelible imprint in transnational conceptualizations of the traumatized subject. Dedicated to the 'sixty million and more' African Americans killed in the slave trade, *Beloved* furthermore invites associations with Morante's focus on the historically disenfranchised, with *History: A Novel* addressed to the marginalized victims of history: the socially subjugated illiterate ('por el analfabeto a quien escribo'), as well as the

victims of Hiroshima's atomic bomb and hence one of the foremost symbols of historical abuses of power and violence who are called upon in the epigraph.

1.1.1. *Trauma, Pictures, Colours*

In Morrison's writing, the transgenerational trauma of slavery⁴ is often negotiated through the maternal body, with the mother-daughter bond offering a unique paradigm of the transmissibility of traumatic memories. As Hirsch has shown, *Beloved* offers an example of how the voices of mothers and daughters can speak the unspeakable plots originating with the mother (1998, 197–98). With the latter figure emerging as the source of a postmemorial structure of remembering, one of the central tropes used in this context is the episodic re-emergence of painful episodes of the past through the notion of what Morrison terms 'rememory'. If postmemory is the transmission of trauma to the subsequent generation, 'rememory' refers to a less mediated form of memory specific to the first-generation victims of traumatic events 'that is communicated through bodily symptoms' and that, akin to the repetition compulsion in the elaboration of trauma, manifests itself in a form of re-enactment that indeed dictates the central plotline of the novel (Hirsch 2012, 82–87).

One of the reasons why Morrison's novel is so compelling is that she explores multiple semiotic codes that challenge the primacy of the word to express an inherently inexpressible horror. A particularly potent device in forging a language of trauma is her recourse to ekphrastic, visual elements that inform some of the most poignant moments throughout the novel. In fact, the intrusion/re-enactment of Sethe's past often occurs in the form of unprocessed pictures or images that recall a specifically fixed, spatial, and often materially tangible dimension⁵:

You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. [...] Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone but the place - the picture of it - stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. (*Beloved*, 43; henceforth referred to as B)

Particularly prominent is the 'rememory' of Sethe's former slaveowner's place, of the painfully ironic name Sweet Home, the prime locus of trauma that remains as a 'thought picture' which is relentlessly evoked by external prompts, haunting Sethe in its fixity:

Someday you will be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. [...] A thought picture. [...] Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. [...] The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there [...] it will happen again. (B, 43)

Given the difficulty of translating traumatic experience into linguistic memory, scholars have pointed out that traumatic events are often 'registered in a specific, imagistic way that stands outside normal memory creation' (Luckhurst 2008, 148; see also van der Kolk and van der Hart, 1995). The latter findings chime not only with the iconic recall in the above passage, but the sensory prompts of traumatic recollection also align with Herman's emphasis on post-traumatic hyperarousal symptoms that leave chronically traumatized people 'continually hypervigilant, anxious, and agitated' (Herman [1992] 1997, 86). The clarity and fixity of the 'photo-in-absentia' (Mihailescu 2015, 185) evoked

above suggests parallels with the complex temporality of trauma as the image captures a scene that has been there yet is always already in the past, whilst haunting the subject in the present (Hirsch 2001, 14). The repetitive nature of this vision, on the other hand, points to an unprocessed element that periodically revisits the affected subject in the form of deferred flashbacks, hence recalling the Freudian notion of *Nachträglichkeit*.

The focus on images in *Beloved* is further reinforced by the prominent presence of photographs in the novel, whose structural parallels with trauma have been amply explored by scholars (Baer 2002; Bishop 2020; Petit and Pozorski 2018). There is a persistent presence of photographs and their palimpsestic link to the past throughout the novel. Firstly, Morrison complements the true 1856 newspaper clipping of Margaret Garner's infanticide, from which *Beloved* took inspiration, with a picture of Sethe in the local newspaper that denounces her violent act. Paul D.'s refusal to acknowledge any similarity with her ('that ain't her mouth'; B, 183) amounts to a powerful act of rebellion against the appropriation of the black female body and voice in public discourse (Mihailescu 2015, 179–80).⁶ The evocation of yet another photograph in the last pages of the novel suggests an uncanny, haunting presence amongst the visual cues of the past:

Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative – looked at too long – shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do. (B, 325)

Furthermore, critics have drawn attention to the use of colour in the novel, for instance, the repeated references to red accompanying the haunting memory of Sethe's violent act (Bast 2011). Yet, there is also a persistent focus on the often synaesthetic perception of other colours that seem to track the characters' psychic trajectories as they process trauma.⁷ Paralysed by her traumatic past, Sethe seems to have become blind to colour, with the last chromatic impressions she remembers clearly linked to the unspeakable act: 'it was as though one day she saw red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it' (B, 47). For her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, on the other hand, deeply traumatized by a life of slavery encompassing unspeakable horrors, colours seem to offer non-verbal or nondiscursive signs and images that contrast and indeed serve to recodify a reality that is dominated by a white, male master-discourse (Koenen 1999). The narrative repeatedly references her searching and craving for or pondering of colour (B, 4; 104; 208), and the novel ends on the 'quilt patched in carnival colors' (B, 321) that starkly contrasts with the verbal discourse of the oppressor, providing an alternative semiotic code for the things there are no 'word-shapes for' (B, 116).

1.1.2. *Corporeal (Maternal) Maps of Trauma*

A second semiotic code Morrison resorts to in her nondiscursive articulation of trauma is the topography of the body. Postcolonial trauma has long been associated with bodily mutilation,⁸ with the latter serving as a central trope in the negotiation of trauma. The surgical metaphors in Fanon's text — including amputation, excision, and haemorrhage — speak effectively to trauma 'as a living bodily wound' (Borzaga 2012, 81), and postcolonial healing often involves a mnemonic confrontation with past traumatic suffering and dismemberment (Kurtz 2018, 14). In Morrison's texts, dismemberment affects the maternal body with specific poignancy, with the latter variously affected by inscriptions, disabilities and fractures that are 'directly attributable to the system of slavery' as

a structure of abusive power and its overdetermining effects (Quayson 2007, 17; 109), as are the constitutive ambiguities and indeed often the 'dissociated violence' (Bouson 2000, 3) around motherhood in several of Morrison's works.

The most salient examples of the latter are the acts of infanticide committed by the protagonist Eva in Morrison's second novel *Sula's* ([1973] 2005; Eva sets fire to her son Plum) and by *Beloved's* Sethe, as well as the systematic reluctance/inability of characters to form an emotional attachment with their offspring: the multiply disfigured and often disabled maternal body bears the scars of trauma that is deeply rooted in the brutal practices of slavery. In fact, maternity emerges as a fundamentally different experience for slaves, whose affective and familial bonds are systemically castrated by the slave owners. Sethe, for instance, only saw her mother a few times — mainly when leaving for the fields — before the latter died by hanging. She could only breastfeed her daughter for two or three weeks before she needed to return to work (B, 72), as was common practice. Baby Suggs, on the other hand, bore nine children and could only keep her youngest, Halle, who ultimately bought her freedom: 'After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like fish bone [...] it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy' (B, 209).⁹ One of the single most traumatizing events at the heart of the novel that marks the pinnacle of Sethe's mental and physical abuse is the stealing of her milk by her slaveowner's nephews, an episode that violates the black woman's body by an 'appropriation of [her] nurturing' (Koenen 1999, 120), hence deliberately sabotaging the mother-child bond.

The abusive act in many ways seals a lineage of maltreatment of the black female body that is etched onto the novel's scarred corporeal topographies. Nan, for instance, 'had one good arm and one half of another' (B, 73–4); Sethe's elusive mother is recognizable to her daughter through the mark burnt on her skin, a cross and a circle (B, 73). Baby Suggs, on the other hand, has a hip injury that makes her 'jerk [...] like a three-legged dog' (B, 164), visibly bearing the signs of years of physical and mental abuse: 'slave life had "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue"' (B, 102); Sethe herself is so badly beaten by her slaveowners that she bears a scar in the form of a chokecherry tree on her back, which in turn she links to the mark on the skin that distinguished her mother.¹⁰

The transgenerational transmission of trauma in the novel follows a matrilineal line: while Sethe is the traumatized protagonist and *Beloved* represents the traumatic past, it is the surviving daughter Denver who appropriates her mother's painful 'rememory' and positions herself within a culture of postmemory. Merging all these voices, Denver seems to 'put the image in narrative motion' (Mihailescu 2015, 188) as the story becomes a polyphonic, articulate recounting of the traumatic past through a newly reconfigured female voice that challenges the invisibility of black women in cultural and historical narratives.

1.2. Elsa Morante: Bodily and Urban Topographies of Trauma

Recent research has firmly established Elsa Morante's *La Storia* as one of the foundational trauma narratives in post-war Italian literature (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021; Wehling-Giorgi 2022). Elsa Morante's novel *La Storia* narrates the fate of the mother-son duo Ida and Useppe — the illegitimate product of rape by a German soldier — during and in the immediate aftermath of WWII in urban Rome. The novel focuses on the atrocities of

history in a text that intimately interweaves personal and collective trauma as it embeds a microhistory of the disenfranchised within the broader framework of Great History (de Rogatis 2022) in the context of the Holocaust. The protagonist Ida is not only a woman and single mother of an illegitimate child, but she is also a Jew in the era of racial and ethnic persecution. Scholars have acknowledged that the novel's very composition in the 1970s is marked by the latent trauma experienced by the half-Jewish author during WWII (Lucamante 2014, 159), while the characters' fate in *History: A Novel* is inevitably inflected by trauma and a form of doubling affecting the protagonist Ida (Rosa 1995, 269). It is only in recent scholarship (de Rogatis 2022; de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021; von Treskow 2017; Wehling-Giorgi 2022), however, that the author's text has been reread through the productive lens of trauma studies; in fact, it is surprising that only now, nearing the end of its fifth decade, *History: A Novel* is revalorized as an essential text in the study of collective and individual trauma in modern Western history.

Morante of course deals with a trauma that fundamentally differs from the intergenerational effects of slavery. As underlined above, Rothberg's study shifts the focus from the insistence on the uniqueness of the Holocaust to considering it 'as part of a multidirectional network of diverse histories of trauma and extreme violence' (Rothberg 2009, 132). Further scholars who have advocated a fruitful dialogue between the Holocaust and Black American writers' narration of slavery include Hirsch and Craps, with the latter scholar's notion of 'cross-traumatic affiliation' arguing for bridging the gap between Jewish and Postcolonial Studies (Craps 20, 80–88). The focus on the asymmetries of power and the resulting trauma affecting the liminal bodies of the present case studies will allow us to create meaningful points of contact between the texts of Morrison, Morante and Ferrante. Morrison and Morante's works in fact similarly emphasize the persistent threat of (lasting) trauma, with the former reminding us that 'it will happen again' (B, 43), while the latter bookends her novel with the warning 'and History continues ...' ('... e la storia continua'; *La Storia*, 656, henceforth: S; *History: A Novel*, 734, henceforth: H, Morante 1977).

1.2.1. Morante: Oral History and Icons of Trauma

As we have seen with Morrison's focus on alternative semiotic codes, in Morante's texts the unspeakable horrors of history find their way into the textual fabric under various guises. While trauma remains largely unspoken, it resurfaces in the novel's various slippages, gaps, and dreams. It is not the official news channels that speak the unbearable truth, but it is the spectral presence of the toothless and formless madwoman Vilma, a 'ragazza invecchiata' (S, 60; 'aged spinster': H, 64) whose language remains unintelligible to most of the inhabitants of the ghetto, that becomes the sole source of political news for Ida (S, 136; H, 150). It is she, whom Ida interestingly compares to a 'prophetess' and a 'ghost' ('as at the sight of a ghost'; 'come alla vista di un fantasma'; S, 479; H, 538), who warns the Jews in the ghetto of the impending roundup on 16 October 1943 ('una nuova strage peggio di quella di Erode'; S, 60; H, 65).¹¹ As we shall further discuss below, in Ferrante's texts it is also the ghost that incarnates the traumatic past, while in Morrison's novel the return of *Beloved* similarly reproduces the spectral, haunting presence of trauma.

As I have discussed previously, arguably the most powerful alternative semiotic code used by Morante is the novel's ekphrastic imagery or the imagery relating to vision insofar

as it mirrors the unprocessed status of the traumatic moment (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021; Wehling-Giorgi 2022). The complex trope of trauma in Morante's work can in fact be fruitfully approached through the extraordinarily rich imagistic, ekphrastic dimension of the novel, which includes its photographic *imagetexts* (Mitchell 1994, 89), visually focalized hallucinations as well as oneiric and multistable visions that all provide privileged access to a traumatic experience that remains otherwise silenced. While I have previously shown how the novel's photographic imagery opens to an otherwise inaccessible zone of trauma that reproduces its complex temporality (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021; Wehling-Giorgi 2022), here I focus on the protagonist's altered modes of perception (hallucinatory visions), bodily ailments and her close entanglement with the more-than human as a central trope of disintegration to explore the narrativization of trauma in the novel.

The phenomenology of the oneiric in Morante's works extends well beyond the realm of sleep to include visions, daydreams and mirages, to the extent that 'the (con)fusion between wakefulness and sleep becomes programmatic' (Porciani 2019, 242; translation mine). Ida's various instances of doubling can be productively linked to trauma-related dissociation, whilst at the same time further underscoring the fragile, materially enmeshed makeup of the human body. Dissociation is a complex phenomenon that involves the automatic removal from the scene of trauma as the individual fails to integrate sensory data at a cognitive or linguistic level. Recent studies have shown that the latter response often results in 'a division of an individual's personality [...] that determines his or her characteristic mental and behavioural actions' (Niejenhuis Ellert and Van der Hart 2011, qtd in Moskovitz, Heinimaa, and Van der Hart 2019).¹⁹ There is plenty of evidence in the novel to substantiate the links between dissociation and Ida's response to individual and collective experiences of trauma. In fact, it is often in the aftermath of traumatizing events like her rape, Nino's death and her various oblique encounters with the horrors of war that the protagonist succumbs to a split consciousness that, as I will show below, is accompanied by a sense of material disintegration: 'Non si sentiva la stessa Ida di prima; ma un'avventuriera della doppia vita' (S, 81) ('She didn't feel the same Ida as before, but rather an adventuress, leading a double life'; H, 90).

Photographs and images provide a productive interpretive key to the characters' dissociative response to trauma that is often captured in the novel's visual imagery. In their imagistic registration, the workings of the camera bear specific resemblance to the structure of traumatic memory, as Baer has argued, with both trauma and photography trapping an event in its occurrence (Baer 2002, 8–9). Together with the visual nature of her dreams, the recall of dissociative states in the novel in fact often features a distinctly visual element, as exemplified in the lucid images of the rape scene haunting Ida: 'i fatti del giorno avanti le riattraversarono la coscienza assolutamente lucida in un urto rapido d'ombre taglienti, come un film in bianco e nero' (S, 81) ('the events of the previous day ran once more through her absolutely lucid mind in a rapid clash of sharp shadows, like a film in black and white'; H, 90).

Trauma is not only narrated in pictures, but dissociative states frequently give rise to an affective imaginative investment into alternative realities that are focalized and visualized through the main characters. When Ida finds out about the death of her first-born child Nino, for instance, she navigates the streets of Rome in a semi-conscious state, failing to preserve any memory of this journey when arriving at the morgue for the identification of

the body. This moment of amnesia, or indeed traumatic dissociation, is likened to an interrupted photographic sequence: 'di tutto questo percorso la sua coscienza non ha registrato nulla, segnalandole solo il punto d'arrivo, *come un fotogramma spezzato*' (S, 465; emphasis mine) ('But of all this journey, her consciousness recorded nothing, marking only the point of arrival, *like a torn film frame*'; H, 522; translation adapted). The dissociative state furthermore affects Ida's vision and auditory perceptions, distorting and deforming the urban landscape and topography around her 'come da specchi convessi' (S, 466) ('as if in convex mirrors'; H, 524): the light is perceived as a 'uno zenith accecante' (S, 465; 'blinding zenith'; H, 523) that bestows all objects an obscene appearance, with even the basilica appearing as distorted (S, 466; H, 523). On another occasion, following the central dream episode discussed above, Ida finds herself febrile and unable to map the city of Rome, whose topography becomes confused and tilted (S, 344; H, 384). The hallucinatory auditory perceptions, on the other hand, extend to projecting a spectral presence of Useppe in the domestic space after his tragic death (S, 647; H, 724).

It is also the semantic field of vision — and more specifically the eyes — that often provide the first clues to the individual's post-traumatic state. The eyes provide a window into the traumatized mind of the individual and, by inference, of the collective. When Nino tells the story of his killing of a German soldier, for instance, he assumes an uncharacteristically empty expression which recalls the hollow glass of a lens: 'D'un tratto il suo occhio, sempre così animato, ebbe una strana fissità corrusca, vuota d'immagini come il vetro d'una lente' (S, 211) ('suddenly his eyes, always so lively, had a strange, frowning stare, drained of images, like the glass of a lens'; H, 233). Later in the novel, Ida once again recognizes Nino's 'sguardo di lampo fotografico' (S, 442) ('like a photographer's flash'; H, 497) when recounting the violence of war, as if the horrors were imagistically captured in his eyes.

Similarly, trauma is pictured in the indecipherable images impressed onto the retinas of the returning Jews after the war:

[N]ei loro occhi infossati [...] non parevano rispecchiarsi le immagini presenti d'intorno, ma una qualche ridda di figure allucinatorie, come una lanterna magica di forme assurde girante in perpetuo (S, 376). [Their hollow eyes [...] didn't seem to reflect the images of their present surroundings, but some host of haunting figures, like a magic lantern of constantly changing, absurd forms. (H, 422)]

Images provide fleeting access to moments that otherwise remain unprocessed, to a liminal space that remains otherwise untold. The latter is further explored in Ida's various moments of doubling, which provide another productive way of accessing a liminal zone that remains otherwise silenced and which is clearly linked by the narrator to the protagonist's nocturnal dreams and her daytime altered states of consciousness (S, 135; H, 149).

1.2.2. *Traumas, Bodies, Matter*

Ida and her youngest son Useppe enjoy a symbiotic, pre-conceptual relationship that does not progress due to the latter's premature death (Wehling-Giorgi 2013). Multiple strands of trauma intersect in their intimately interlaced bodies: the transgenerational trauma of Jewish persecution; rape (of whom Useppe is the product); the trauma of war and violence. In fact, while Ida's behaviour includes various symptoms of PTSD including hypervigilance and instances of doubling, the epilepsy transferred along a matrilineal line

within the family is the most obvious physiological correlative of (transgenerational) trauma that has been previously linked to an overarching historical dimension of the novel (de Rogatis 2022).

One episode of 'sdoppiamento' that specifically illustrates the close link between traumatic and altered psychological states is the scene following Nino's death, a moment that heralds a profound structural and expressive fracture (Rosa 1995, 273) in the novel as it also coincides with Useppe's first epileptic attack. The blunt impact of the event is compared to a ruptured frame. It is not only the psyche that suffers fragmentation as a result, but this episode sees a similar fusion between Ida's porous body and the urban topography of the city with a recurring focus on naturally derived construction materials 'gesso' (chalk or plaster) and 'calce' (lime) that feature centrally in other close encounters with trauma (see also my prior discussion of the character's trans-corporeal encounters in the oneiric dimension of the novel; Wehling-Giorgi 2022).

The interpenetration between body and lime, a naturally occurring chemical compound, provides a compelling imagery of a deep-seated sense of material fragmentation and altered perception that dominates the entire episode, with the body portrayed as a porous receptacle in which things can settle and sediment (Abram, in Iovino and Opperman 2012, 459). Starting with Ida feeling the taste of lime in entering the white room of the mortuary ('il sapore polveroso della calcina'; S, 465; 'she seemed to taste that dusty lime'; H, 522), a cement-like substance subsequently fills her throat and prevents her from screaming 'come se le avessero colato del cemento' (S, 465) ('as if they had poured concrete over her'; H, 523). In the following scene, we can witness her body mirroring the fragility and fragmentation of the war-torn urban architecture of an alien city: 'questi paesi sono fatti di calce che si può spaccare e sbriciolare da un momento all'altro. Lei stessa è un pezzo di calce, e rischia di cascare in frantumi e venire spazzata via' (S, 466) ('These villages are made of plaster, all plaster, which can crack and collapse at any moment. She herself is a piece of plaster, and risks crumbling into fragments and being swept away before she reaches home'; H, 524).

Her body not only disintegrates into the dust and lime akin to a wall ('il corpo le si rompeva in polvere e calcinacci, come un muro'; S, 466; 'her body was breaking into dust and rubble, like a wall'; H, 524), but the wall itself assumes agentic, anthropomorphic features that merge with Ida's in a compelling image of trans-corporeality: 'Non solo il proprio corpo, ma le pareti stesse fruscivano e sibilavano riducendosi in polvere' (S, 466) ('not only her own body, but the walls themselves rustled and hissed, turning to dust'; H, 524). The detritus of war inscribes itself onto and indeed penetrates the violently inflected urban architecture and the body to articulate a destructive, all-encompassing traumatic moment in history. In its agential intra-actions (Barad 2008, 135), any ontological dichotomies between human and non-human are levelled as bodies are 'literally swallowed up, fatally fused with the rubble' (Walker 2020, 86). The porous female body not only emerges as a privileged signifier of an all-pervasive state of trauma, but it is also the female voice that harnesses the expressive potentialities of trauma to tell a formerly untold story.

1.3. Ferrante's Works: Legacies of Patriarchal Violence and Intergenerational Trauma

When assessing the legacy of intergenerational trauma in Ferrante's works, the most recent and indeed contemporary of the texts explored, I contend that the author dialogues with both Morrison and Morante's respective *Urtexts* when conceptualizing a form of insidious trauma that defines the experience of the modern female subject in a global context. In fact, *Beloved* is included among Ferrante's list of Top 40 books by female authors,¹² and the author has never made a secret of the enormous intellectual and creative debt she owes to her Italian predecessor.¹³ Similarly to what we have seen in both Morrison and Morante's work, trauma in Ferrante's texts appears as intergenerationally and socially transmissible¹⁴ and deeply engrained in society's power structures. In all three authors' texts, it is often the disobedient female/maternal body — a body 'in disarray' ('in disordine'; *Storia del nuovo cognome*, henceforth: SNC, 101 (Ferrante, 2012); *Story of a New Name*, henceforth: SNN, 100) with its various disabilities, illnesses, and mutilations — that filters the tensions and disarticulations that mark the traumatic moment.

Ferrante's work deals with various instances of trauma (see Caffè 2021; de Rogatis 2019, 2021; de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2021; Wehling-Giorgi 2021) — or indeed a substratum/suppressed archive of trauma that underlies the author's 'underground realism' (de Rogatis 2021, 23) — that articulate the formerly silenced voices of her female ancestors. While the destinies of Morrison's and Morante's characters are set against the backdrop of major historical, collective traumas, Ferrante's work provides a powerful reflection on the enduring legacy of patriarchal violence from the post-war period to contemporary, neoliberal and globalized society.

1.3.1. Haunting, Disobedient Bodies: Ferrante's *Poverella*

As I have previously argued, it is in combination with motherhood that bodily deformation reaches its full force in Ferrante's works. In fact, mothers and pregnant bodies are mercilessly desecrated by disease, dislocation and disgust (Milkova 2013; Wehling-Giorgi 2017). A powerful, recurring example of the dominated and silenced women affected by insidious trauma in Ferrante's work is the figure of the so-called 'poverella' (the poor, abandoned wife). The character first surfaces in the author's second novel *The Days of Abandonment* (*I giorni dell'abbandono*; henceforth: DA; GA; Ferrante, 2002), she is exhaustively discussed in *Frantumaglia: A Writer's Journey* (*Frantumaglia*; henceforth: F) and then returns in the Neapolitan Novels under the guise of the abandoned Melina. The *poverella* in *The Days of Abandonment* refers to a Neapolitan woman who, with clear Virgilian echoes, drowned herself at Capo Miseno after her husband's abandonment (see GA, 56; DA, 52; see also F, 107).

Ferrante had originally conceptualized the return of the *poverella*'s ghost in her second novel as a revenant from the past who embodies a collective fear that deeply resonates with her: 'Olga sees in that ghost all the female anguish of the patriarchal epoch and recognizes it in herself' (F, 107). While the *poverella* and her suicidal tendencies become a constituent part of Olga in the early days of her abandonment (F, 109), throughout the course of the novel she increasingly distances herself from the ghost of the past, whose memory remains fixed in the semblance of a sepulchral statue (GA, 47; DA, 44) or

a photographic image: 'the *poverella* had become again an old photograph, the petrified past, without blood' (DA, 184; 'la poverella era ridiventata come una vecchia foto, passato impietrito, senza sangue'; GA, 207). The frozen spectral image and its links with the photograph evoke parallels with the imagistic registration of traumatic memory and the complex temporalities of trauma.¹⁵

Interestingly, it is also the story of the *poverella*, narrated by her seamstress mother, that first triggers Olga's desire to write (GA, 47; DA, 44), combining both the ancient art of female craftsmanship and the transformation of a formerly untold, traumatic story into narrative form. Ultimately, the threat emanating from the past is overcome, with the *poverella* acting as a creative force (Ferrara 2016, 150) that propels Olga to envisage life outside the model of the broken woman (F, 107), engendering a transformation that parallels the many instances in Ferrante's works that see trauma channelled into creativity.

In the Neapolitan Novels, trauma is similarly passed down a matrilineal line. The protagonist and narrator Elena's mother Immacolatella and her deformed body (*Storia del nuovo cognome*, henceforth: SNC, 101; *Story of a New Name*, henceforth: SNN, 102) clearly articulate the threat of a transgenerational legacy of trauma as she passes on her limping gait to her daughter during the latter's pregnancies (*Storia di chi fugge e chi resta*, henceforth: SFR, 213 (Ferrante, 2013); *Those Who Leave and Those Who Stay*, henceforth: TLS, 237). Furthermore, the cycle of novels stage yet a further return of the latent figure of the *poverella*, with a clear link emerging between the latter, the abandoned woman Melina and the co-protagonist Lila, all women whose mental health is impaired due to the dissymmetries in power perpetuated in patriarchal society. Lila in particular is affected, even 'wounded' (SNN, 95; 'ferita', SNC, 96) by Melina's episodes of madness that closely resonate with her own mental instability (SNC, 96; SNN, 97; see also SNC, 295; SNN, 303). In fact, a similar social marginalization that further exposes women's vulnerabilities seems to lie at the basis of Lila's identification with Melina (Caffè 2021, 38), with the former particularly attuned to their 'shared fate' or 'secret bond' (de Rogatis 2019, 89–90). Melina and Lila form an integral part of this chain of ancestral women who are constantly threatened with violent erasure by patriarchy. While the former character is dominated by her madness (SNC, 96; SNN, 97), like Olga, Lila ultimately reaffirms her agency in a carefully masterminded self-cancellation that culminates in her eventual disappearance.

With the figure of the *poverella* firmly anchored in Ferrante's poetics, her spectral returns and her links with a genealogy of erased women invite parallels with the haunting, compulsive repetition of trauma. The sense of dislocation suffered by Ferrante's female characters is reflected in the key term and Ferrantian neologism of 'smarginatura' (literally: dissolving margins), arguably a further physiological and existential sign of trauma that marks the experience of distress, anxiety, terror, and hallucinations (Caffè 2019). In fact, as Ferrante has underlined herself, her characters narrate from 'inside the whirlwind of suffering', in a state that abrogates linear time and contiguous space which deeply resonates not only with *smarginatura* but with trauma (F, 109).

1.3.2. Visual Narratives of Trauma: The Central Photo Panel

Ferrante's works exhibit a specific focus on the ekphrastic negotiation of gendered, systemic violence. The various 'modes of visual [...] appropriation' (Milkova 2021, 110) in her texts can also be productively read through the trope of trauma in their focus on

iconically fixing the violated female body and then transforming it through an act of re-telling in the ekphrastic textualisation of the image. For, as Mitchell has shown, ekphrasis is a process that is stationed between two 'othernesses' (1994, 164), involving both the conversion of the visual into the verbal representation and the reconversion of the verbal representation back into the visual object in the reception of the reader. This involves an act of intersemiotic 'translation' that is structurally comparable to the conversion from traumatic into narrative memory.

The central image of the photo panel in the Neapolitan Novels, in which Lila's picture as a spouse is cut up and then jointly manipulated by both protagonists to form a collage, can be productively reread through the lens of trauma studies as its visual cues draw together the various traumatic stressors of the novel. One of the visual markers that connects numerous episodes of *smarginatura* throughout the novel is a recurring colour scheme that intimately interweaves the various experiences of trauma that are, in some cases, mirrored or indeed triggered by natural disasters.¹⁶ A key episode that channels this visual tableau of trauma occurs in the last volume of the quartet in the immediate aftermath of the 1980 earthquake in Naples, a natural catastrophe that is experienced together by the profoundly shaken female protagonists. In fact, immediately following the seismic shock Lila provides a vivid account of her multiple sources of anxiety that visually recall central episodes of trauma narrated throughout the Neapolitan quartet. It is on this occasion that Lila conjures up her first experience of *smarginatura* that inaugurates a lasting inner change (*L'amica geniale*, henceforth: AG, 174 (Ferrante, 2011); *My Brilliant Friend*, henceforth: BF, 176), the central New Year's Eve episode in 1958 narrated in the first volume, as well as evoking other key episodes including the magical explosion of a copper pan following a series of tense confrontations with the camorrista Marcello Solara (AG, 224; BF, 229):

Mi spaventò invece che i colori dei fuochi d'artificio fossero taglienti – il **verde** e il **viola** soprattutto erano affilati –, che ci potessero squartare, che le scie dei razzi strusciassero su mio fratello Rino come lime, come raspe, e gli spaccassero la carne, che facessero sgocciolare fuori da lui un altro mio fratello disgustoso [...]. Per tutta la vita non ho fatto altro, Lenù, che arginare momenti come quelli. [...] devo sempre fare, rifare, coprire, scoprire, rinforzare, e poi all'improvviso disfare, spaccare. (SBP, 163; emphasis mine)

[I was afraid that the colors of the fireworks were sharp – the **green** and the **purple** especially were razorlike- that they could butcher us, that the trails of the rockets were scraping my brother Rino like files, like rasps, and broke his flesh, caused another, disgusting brother to drip out of him [...]. All my life I've done nothing, Lenù, but hold back moments like those. [...] I always have to do, redo, cover, uncover, reinforce, and then suddenly undo, break.' (SLC, 186)]

Most significantly, though, the chromatic cues in this passage clearly interweave the recollected episodes with the collage-style patchwork of the photo panel. In the latter, the original photograph of Lila in her wedding dress is, in fact, intimately linked to her husband Stefano's claims to ownership over her body, hence evoking the multiple sources of abuse suffered in her marriage, including rape and unwanted pregnancy. Furthermore, in its employment as commercial bait, the image illustrates the usurpation and commodification of Lila's creative powers, all acts of violent appropriation that relegate her to a formless, subaltern state of subsumption (SNC, 122; SNN, 122). The razor-sharp colours which emerge in her synaesthetic account of *smarginatura* not only recall

Ferrante's recurrent focus on incisions on the female body 'as inscriptions of male/patriarchal appropriation' (Milkova 2021, 39), but both the colour scheme (once again privileging green and purple) evoked, as well as the imagery of sharp objects, tie the original experience of *smarginatura* to the central photo collage that visually deconstructs Lila into truncated body parts.¹⁷ The recurrent focus on violet in particular recalls the colour of fresh scars on the violated body. The sharp tools of patriarchy (i.e., the scissors) are here repurposed into a tool that enables a creative reconceptualization of Lila's self. If trauma fiction explores 'new modes of referentiality' (Whitehead 2004, 83), it is in images and chromatic tropes that trauma finds its supreme form of expression:

Con i cartoncini neri, coi cerchi **verdi e violacei** che Lila tracciava intorno a certe parti del suo corpo, con le linee rosso sangue con cui si trinciava e diceva di trinciarsi, realizzò la propria autodistruzione *in immagine*. (SNC, 122)

[With the black paper, with the **green and purple** circles that Lila drew around certain parts of her body, with the blood-red lines with which she sliced and said she was slicing it, she completed her own self-destruction *in an image*. (SNN, 121)]

Due to its links with self-cancellation, the image also proleptically foreshadows Lila's disappearance (which, moreover, is also visually introduced in her cutting herself out of the family photographs preceding her disappearance, as announced in the prologue: AG, 18; BF, 22) whilst establishing an indirect association with the vanishing of the dolls and of Lila's daughter, Tina. By synecdochally condensing the major sources of trauma in this visual tableau whilst staging its haunting returns, the image also structurally reproduces and indeed iconically condenses the complex temporality and the repetitive deferral mechanism of trauma. Instead of giving rise to the erasure of the female voice, however, this shared act of creation engenders an 'aesthetic project' (SLC, 500; 'progetto estetico'; SBP, 433), i.e., a new, jointly authored narrative that emerges from the very unspeakability of trauma, here condensed into the fixity of the image. The violated, traumatized female body is hence no longer exposed to and annihilated by patriarchal violence, but it becomes the source of a new, dynamic story that textually unfolds in the quartet itself.

2. Conclusion

Morrison, Morante and Ferrante are all engaged in weaving together a visual and textual tapestry that articulates the polyphonic voices of a genealogy of erased women. They resurrect these voices by employing a series of tropes that include the figures of spectral returns and ghosts, nondiscursive signs and images and other linguistic and structural disarticulations that all challenge and indeed recodify a dominant master discourse. Furthermore, all three authors employ the wounded topographies of the liminal maternal body to articulate the collective dismemberment of transgenerational trauma.

Their stories are compelling because they foreground traumatized subjectivities whilst calling for a new aesthetics of 'fantastical tropes, exploded time schemes, and impossible causations' (Luckhurst 2008, 97) that have been previously associated with magical realism. Any counterfactual elements in the three authors' works, however, remain firmly rooted in the historical calamities of their times. In fact, two of the ghost figures explored above are directly modelled on historical

individuals (Morrison and Morante), while Ferrante's *poverella* emerges from a clearly tangible socio-historical, patriarchal context that continues to issue a real threat to modern women. By productively channelling the experience of trauma through the disenfranchised and often multiply marginalized body, all three authors' works powerfully intercept and indeed translate the spectral (hi)stories of diverse settings of violence and trauma whilst engaging in a multidirectional, dynamic and transnational dialogue.

Notes

1. For further details on the harrowing conditions of black motherhood under slavery, see for example Davis (1981), and Bouson (2000, 138 ff).
2. See Luckhurst (2008, 92) for a detailed account of the novel's complex chronology.
3. Morrison came across Garner in a newspaper clipping from 1856, as she was researching material for *The Black Book* (1974), a collage-style, encyclopaedic investigation into the black experience in America.
4. *Beloved* includes several references not only to the generational transmission of trauma from mother to daughter, but she also resurrects the ghosts from the Ur-trauma of the Middle Passage through Beloved's fragmented, dissociative discourse.
5. For an illuminating discussion of the role of nature as an oppositional space in Morrison's work, see Alaimo (2019, 137–140).
6. 'There was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear' (B, 183).
7. Recent research has highlighted some initial links between synaesthesia and PTSD (see Hoffman et al. 2019).
8. See also Kurtz (2018, 13–14), who further discusses bodily dismemberment in relation to trauma in Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe.
9. For further details on the dire conditions of black motherhood under slavery, see Angela Davis (*Women, Race and Class*, New York: Random House, 1981), and Bouson (2000, 138 ff).
10. There are some fascinating ecocritical readings of Morrison's texts that highlight the central role of the more-than-human played in her texts: (Henderson 2020; Wardi 2021).
11. As Josi has shown, the spectral figure of Vilma is based on the historically rooted figure of Celeste, who warned the Jews of the impending roundup and is immortalized in Giacomo Debenedetti's narrative account of the Jewish roundup (Josi 2023, 91).
12. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/nov/21/elena-ferrante-names-her-40-favourite-books-by-female-authors> (last accessed on 15 November 2022).
13. See e.g., Ferrante, 'Mother's Dressmakers' (F, 16). Scholars who have written on the parallels between Morante and Ferrante include Gambaro (2018), Falotico (2015), de Rogatis (2014, 2019), and Wehling-Giorgi (2017, 2021).
14. See Torunn (2018) for an account of the relational nature of trauma in *The Lost Daughter*.
15. See also F, 107: 'the fascination with death that comes from the past, from the poverella. Together — mother and daughter — they will declare a right to the life outside, outside the model of broken women.'
16. Episodes in which the colour violet is associated with either the uncanny force of nature include: 'But in the distance, between sea and clouds, there was a long gash that collided with the violet shadow of Vesuvius, a wound from which a dazzling whiteness dripped' (SFR, 182; TLS, 301: 'Ma in fondo, tra mare e nuvole, c'era uno squarcio lungo che urtava contro l'ombra viola del Vesuvio, una ferita da cui grondava una bianca abbagliante'). See also *Troubling Love*, 96: 'The sea had become a violet paste. The noise of the storm and the noise of the city made a furious commotion' (*L'amore molesto*, 120: Il mare era diventato una pasta violacea. I suoni della mareggiata e quelli della città producevano una miscela furibonda, Ferrante, 1992).

17. Also in *The Days of Abandonment* the photo collage provides an occasion to take stock of the family before the act of separation and serves as a springboard for the protagonist Olga to move beyond her destructive phase: 'I took a pair of scissors and, for a whole long silent evening, cut out eyes, ears, legs, noses, hands of mine, of the children, of Mario. The result was a single body of monstrous futurist indecipherability, which I immediately threw in the garbage' (GA, 184; DA, 164: 'Ritagliai con le forbici [...] occhi, orecchie, gambe, basi, mani mie, dei bambini, di Mario. Mi misi a incollarle su un foglio da disegno. Ottenni un unico corpo di mostruosa indecifrabilità futurista, che mi affrettai a gettare nella spazzatura').

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