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Comparative Approaches to Elena Ferrante: Traumas, Bodies, Languages

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ABSTRACT

The introduction to this Special Issue lays out the rationale for analysing Elena Ferrante's novels through a comparative perspective, in relation to works by Anglophone, French, and Italian authors. The editors first situate Ferrante's writing within world literature, underlining the extensive intertextual network contained within and generated by her novels. Next, drawing on trauma studies, the introduction proposes trauma as a multidisciplinary interpretive lens for approaching Ferrante's cultural production as a compelling site of traumatic expression. The introduction concludes by outlining the articles in the Special Issue with their specific theoretical and comparative frameworks, stressing their contributions to the larger conversations about world literature, women's writing, and the global burgeoning of female literary genealogies.

KEYWORDS

Elena Ferrante; trauma narratives; female subjectivity; world literature

Introduction

Situated at the intersection of global realism and trauma (de Rogatis 2019, 2021) and understood as world literature (Mikova 2021), Elena Ferrante's works invite comparative approaches, interdisciplinary frameworks, and transversal readings. The resounding success in the Anglophone world (and beyond) of Ferrante's cycle of four novels *My Brilliant Friend* (2012, 2013, 2014, 2015) — the so-called Neapolitan Quartet — has secured the author's place within a system of global circulation, translation, and readership. David Damrosch defines world literature not as a canon of texts or established classics, but as a mode of reading and engaging with other texts, ideas, or forms: 'the great conversation of world literature takes place on two very different levels: among authors who know and react to one another's work, and in the mind of the reader, where works meet and interact in ways that have little to do with cultural and historical proximity' (Damrosch 2003, 298). On the one hand, this concept of world literature accounts for Ferrante's popularity across languages and cultures, for her novels have generated transnational conversations — as well as 'addictions' and 'Ferrante fever' — among readers, translators, and literary critics.

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On the other hand, Damrosch's definition underscores the networks of influences and encounters essential to being (becoming) world literature. In this respect, Ferrante's novels employ an extensive intertextual framework while her volumes of non-fictional writing *Frantumaglia* (2016), *Incidental Inventions* (2018), and *In the Margins* (2022) identify a vast repository of influences, ranging from classical texts to contemporary sources. Many current writers and artists have in turn endorsed Ferrante's creative imagination. The American novelist Elizabeth Strout has paid tribute to Ferrante's works, acknowledging their impact: 'I have read all your books, and by reading them I was able to take new risks with my own work' (2022). The virtual conversation between Ferrante and acclaimed performance artist Marina Abramović has highlighted their shared conceptions of representations of the self, authorship, and female identity (2021). Canadian writer Sheila Heti (2017) and British author Rachel Cusk (2015) have both conducted their own textual dialogues with Ferrante, by interviewing her or reviewing her novels. Ferrante has responded by listing her favourite 40 books by female writers (Cain 2020), delineating in effect her own intertextual framework of women's world literature. In fact, as the author stresses in her latest work *In the Margins* (2022), this new female genealogy not only builds on an impetuous, disruptive force that she sees as integral to women's writing, but the female story is also posited as an inherently relational practice that incorporates a multiplicity of voices: 'Now that the first-person narrator has friends, the work is not to write for herself about dealings with the world but to write about the others, to be written about by them, in a complex interplay of identification and estrangement' (81).

The global phenomenon of Elena Ferrante has also taken the form of a growing number of transmedial adaptations for the theatre, television, cinema, and the graphic novel (as well as the iconotext *Incidental Inventions*), backed up by media production giants such as HBO and Netflix. Virtually all of her literary works have been transposed onto another artistic medium. Her first three novels *Troubling Love* (1992), *The Days of Abandonment* (2002), and *The Lost Daughter* (2006) have been made into eponymous feature films. The Neapolitan Quartet (Ferrante, 2011; Ferrante, 2012; Ferrante, 2013; Ferrante, 2014; Ferrante, 2015) exists as different theatrical performances, as an HBO TV series in its fourth season, and as a graphic novel written by playwright and actress Chiara Lagani and illustrated by Mara Cerri. Chiara Lagani's engagement with the Neapolitan Quartet encompasses her play for the Fanny & Alexander Theatre as well — an important intermedial adaptation for the stage of Ferrante's magnum opus. And Ferrante's latest novel, *The Lying Life of Adults* (2019) is the source for the eponymous 2023 TV series produced by Netflix.

International scholarship on Elena Ferrante has likewise grown, moving in diverse directions, espousing a range of approaches, and expanding to include the films and TV series as well. The malleability or adaptability of Ferrante's novels, their circulation in translation far beyond their culture of origin, and above all, their capacity to capture readers and viewers world-wide, licence a mode of distant reading across geographic and cultural boundaries, a mode which opens new comparative avenues for understanding literary phenomena such as the novel, as Franco Moretti has argued (2000). In this Special Issue we adopt a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to Elena Ferrante's writing, exploring its echoes, connections, and ramifications beyond its Italian context. The

decontextualization that comparison relies on as it moves beyond the particular and local also involves a recontextualization, what Susan Stanford Friedman calls ‘a radical juxtaposition of texts from different geohistorical and cultural locations’ (2011, 759).

Within its overarching comparative framework, this Special Issue furthermore foregrounds new, pressing lines of enquiry that situate Ferrante’s texts within an Italian and transnational landscape of female-authored trauma narratives (Wehling-Giorgi 2022a, 2022b). Recent scholarship has productively aligned Ferrante’s texts within one of the narrative forms of realism emerging in the Global Novel — traumatic realism (de Rogatis 2019, 2021) — which upholds claims to reference whilst also depicting a ‘traumatic extremity that disables realist representation’ (Rothberg 2000, 106; see also Foster 1996). Moreover, current research on Ferrante has highlighted the thematization of systemic traumatization in her works, explored in the context of social factors and gendered violence that are endemically engrained in the author’s fictional cityscapes (Caffè 2021, Wehling-Giorgi 2021).

With trauma widely viewed as a defining paradigm of our times (Kurtz 2018, 1) that is of increasing public and scholarly relevance in a post-Covid age, this volume adopts trauma as ‘an exemplary conceptual knot’ or a Latourian ‘hybrid assemblage’ that tangles up and transcends disciplinary boundaries (Luckhurst 2008). Building on a recent critical shift that challenges the representational impasse that was conventionally associated with trauma (Caruth 1996), the contributions to the Special Issue posit and explore Ferrante’s cultural production as a compelling site of traumatic expression, with the comparative approach and its radical juxtapositions befitting the trans-disciplinary nature of trauma itself. Set and conceived in the Mediterranean South (with its distinctive imbrication in the micro and macro traumas of recent modernity), as recent scholarship has shown, Elena Ferrante’s works are ‘particularly well placed to intercept the spectral (hi)stories’, the traumatic junctures of nomadic subjectivities and movements between historical and geopolitical margins and centres (de Rogatis and Wehling-Giorgi 2022, 40). Seen through the polyfocal lens of trauma and studied through a flexible and fluid comparative perspective, Ferrante’s novels generate ideas, theories, and narrative possibilities for the representation of traumatized embodied female subjectivity.

Departing from this common interpretive framework, the contributions to the Special Issue explore new avenues of research that situate Ferrante’s works in an increasingly interconnected global imaginary by staging comparative encounters with a number of Anglophone and transnational writers. Presenting radical juxtapositions of the author’s texts with a host of other authors, theories and genres, the present volume firmly locates Ferrante’s works in a lineage of global, female-authored trauma narratives, providing a productive and hitherto underexplored interpretive key to negotiating some timely lines of enquiry in Ferrante Studies including postcolonial studies, posthumanism, ecofeminism, translation studies, visual studies, and theatre/performance studies. These strategic encounters reframe Ferrante’s texts, opening up insights into the centrality of female embodied experience across the boundaries of language and culture and through the lens of trauma. The conceptual thought that comparison fosters, as Friedman posits, ‘moves knowledge beyond pure particularity and thereby enables theory’, allowing us to see patterns of similarity as part of a broadly systemic form of thinking (Friedman 2011, 756). *Comparative Approaches to Elena Ferrante: Traumas, Bodies, Languages* aims to produce precisely the kind of comparative enquiry that leads to theory (or theories).

Trauma, likewise, supplies an intersectional, transversal, and transdisciplinary analytical lens for exploring the multiply entangled knot of the traumatized subject and for generating new insights and new knowledge.

This special issue positions the female body as central to the literary and theatrical representations of trauma, language, identity, and the environment as they are mutually entwined and mutually constitutive. Ferrante's novels are placed alongside the works of Toni Morrison, Elsa Morante, Catherine Dunne, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gustave Flaubert, and Giacomo Leopardi and examined through different critical lenses, including that of playwright/actress Chiara Lagani who literally recreates and inhabits Ferrante's characters. These comparisons propose a transnational perspective on female-authored narratives about trauma and grief, ecological catastrophe, self-translation, and the legacy of literary fathers, thereby inserting Ferrante's texts within a larger, global discourse about women's bodies and texts.

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi's opening contribution, entitled 'Unspeakable Things Spoken: Transgenerational Trauma, Fractured Bodies and Visual Tropes in Toni Morrison, Elsa Morante and Elena Ferrante's Works', provides a comparative reading of the legacy of transgenerational trauma in the works of the three writers as principally filtered through the maternal body. Identifying a series of recurring tropes in their works that effectively channel the affective experience of the traumatized subject, the article engages all three authors in a productive multidirectional dialogue, arguing that a postcolonial critical framework and its insights into dissymmetries of power and transnational histories can help us throw further light on elements central to all three authors' works: the texts' wounded (bodily and spatial) topographies, hybrid identities and the alternative, non-discursive semiotic codes that challenge the relevant master discourse.

Enrica Maria Ferrara's article, entitled 'Posthumanism and Trauma: The Non-Anthropocentric World of Grief and Objects in Elena Ferrante and Catherine Dunne', provides the first comparative reading between Ferrante's work and the oeuvre of contemporary Irish author Dunne. Ferrara's contribution identifies a series of affinities in the two authors' non-anthropocentric, anti-patriarchal poetics, and in the construction of their female subjects, all aspects that are significantly channelled through the central place that grief and grievability occupy in their texts. Employing the lens of trauma studies and posthumanist theory, her contribution reveals how Dunne and Ferrante's characters overcome abandonment and loss through a productive interconnection with nonhuman objects and entities that are signifiers of grief, such as photographs, dolls and stuffed animals.

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva's essay 'The Trauma of Language Learning and Self-Translation in Elena Ferrante and Jhumpa Lahiri' reads Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet and Lahiri's *In altre parole* as 'language memoirs' (Kaplan 1994), as texts that posit language, language acquisition, and self-translation as central narrative events and sites for identity construction and reinvention of the self. Milkova Rousseva argues that both authors explore the traumatic encounter between a repressed or unlearned native/mother tongue and an adoptive language which is also the very language of their texts and the very proof of their linguistic mastery. The essay draws on trauma studies and translation theory to examine the lexical, structural, and thematic dimensions of what Milkova Rousseva defines as 'dialect trauma' in Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels and 'language imperfection trauma' in Lahiri's *In altre parole*. Milkova Rousseva's essay puts in

conversation depictions of language acquisition and the exiled or migrant self, representations of trauma, and translanguaging writing.

Carlotta Moro's contribution, 'Breaking Out of the Cage of Anthropocentrism: Ecofeminism in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet and Other Essays', further investigates the central co-constitution of discursive and materialist notions of reality in her analysis of the confluence of feminist and ecological concerns throughout Ferrante's literary corpus. Her contribution throws new light on the heretofore understudied element of Ferrante's ecofeminism and its intimate links with a critique of human exceptionalism, drawing some crucial parallels between the concurrent oppression of women and nonhuman animals. Ultimately, the article proposes a reading of Ferrante's keyword *smarginatura* (dissolving margins) that exemplifies the profound enmeshment of the lives of human and nonhuman animals.

Barbara Alfano's essay, 'The Weight of the Paternal: Authorship and Gustave Flaubert's Legacy in Elena Ferrante's *The Lying Life of Adults*', provides a new comparative-critical reading of the author's latest novel, *La vita bugiarda degli adulti* (2019). While much scholarly attention has focused on the centrality of maternal figures in her works, Alfano's article instead turns to the legacy of the literary and fictional fathers, with a specific focus on the subtext that underlies the novel's traumatic incipit: Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. By analysing the spectral presence of male authors and characters in Ferrante's writing, Alfano argues that the latter can be read as a metanarrative reflection that throws new light on the tortuous trajectory of the writer's own coming-of-age.

Finally, the conversation between Chiara Lagani and Katrin Wehling-Giorgi, 'Generative Traumatic Wounds': Notes of a Female Artist — A Conversation with Chiara Lagani, provides some fascinating insights into Lagani's dramaturgical adaptation of *My Brilliant Friend*, renarrated as a performance centred around the tetralogy's traumatic core. Lagani explains how these 'generative wounds' of Ferrante's texts can be viewed as a propulsive creative force that determines the tripartite structure of her dramaturgic adaptation. While Lagani comments on the foundational character of the various double images in Ferrante's quartet, her play stages the ultimate return of the two dolls as 'revenants' who perform the original trauma and its spectral reiterations.

In her most recent book *In the Margins* (Ferrante 2022), Ferrante reflects on the dynamics of writing both within prescribed canons and outside of them, violating the rules and exiting the 'cage' of the male literary patrimony, 'adapting and at the same time deforming' the paradigms of male creativity (80). The encounters we stage on the pages of this Special Issue go 'beyond the boundaries' and 'outside the margins' (*In the Margins*, 20, 82) of literary traditions, genres, and critical approaches. Like Elena Ferrante's project, the essays that follow cross the 'taut lines' (*In the Margins*, 20) that enforce writing between the margins and proceed to enquire into what lies beyond. They situate Ferrante's works in a comparative and transhistorical context while contributing to the larger conversations about world literature, women's transnational writing, and the global burgeoning of female literary genealogies.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Katrin Wehling-Giorgi is Professor of Italian Studies at Durham University, UK. She is the author of *Gadda and Beckett: Storytelling, Subjectivity and Fracture* (Oxford, Legenda, 2014), and she has published widely on European modernism and on female subjectivity in the works of Elsa Morante, Goliarda Sapienza, Alice Sebold and Elena Ferrante in both Italianist and Comparatist Journals. She has co-edited a special issue on Elena Ferrante (*Elena Ferrante in a Global Context*, MLN 136, 1, 2021) and collections of critical essays on *Trauma Narratives in Italian and Transnational Women Writers* (Rome, Sapienza University Press, 2022) and Goliarda Sapienza (*Goliarda Sapienza in Context*, Madison, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016). Her current research focuses on female subjectivity and the maternal figure in the context of visual studies and trauma in twentieth-century and contemporary literature.

Stiliana Milkova Rousseva is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Oberlin College. She specializes in Italian, Russian, and Bulgarian literatures, travel writing, literature and the visual arts, and literary translation. Her publications include *Elena Ferrante as World Literature* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), articles on contemporary Italian women writers as well as on Gogol, Tolstoy, and Dostoevsky, and translations from Italian of works by Adriana Cavarero, Anita Raja, Antonio Tabucchi, Italo Calvino, and others. She is the co-editor of *Natalia Ginzburg's Global Legacies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2024) and the author a book of short fiction in Italian, *Storia delle prime volte* (Voland, 2022).

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