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## Breaking Out of the Cage of Anthropocentrism: Ecofeminism in Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet and Other Essays

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the confluence of feminist and ecological concerns across Elena Ferrante's literary corpus. After a discussion of Ferrante's engagement with Giacomo Leopardi, this paper considers references to the climate emergency and the Campania waste crisis in her work. An analysis of *'Tremore'* illuminates Ferrante's ecofeminism — an ethics of radical openness to all living beings. Proposing an ecofeminist attitude of interspecies solidarity on a damaged planet, the tetralogy explores the concurrent oppressions of women and nonhuman animals. While the episode of Lila's exploitation in the factory connects the butchering of animals to women's physical and financial abuse at the hands of men, Lila's characterization as a snake and a falcon challenges human exceptionalism. *Smarginatura* is understood as an experiment in ecological writing: rather than engaging in an aesthetic or anthropomorphizing contemplation of the world that entails remoteness, Ferrante reminds us of our enmeshment with every form of life.

### KEYWORDS

Elena Ferrante; Giacomo Leopardi; ecofeminism; nature; climate crisis; anthropocentrism

In 2020, Elena Ferrante addressed the climate and ecological crisis with urgency, declaring: '[Ridurre la natura] a magnifico spettacolo è dimenticare di essere frammento tra frammenti di materia. [...] Non prenderci urgentemente cura della natura significa non curarci [...] della nostra sopravvivenza' (Bignardi 2020) ['(Reducing nature) to a magnificent spectacle means forgetting that we are fragments among fragments of matter. (...) Not urgently caring for nature means not caring (...) for our survival']. The protagonists of the Neapolitan Quartet perceive the world as an unpredictably unstable 'palla di fuoco' (2011, 257) ['ball of fire' (2012, 261)], sharing Ferrante's fear of impending natural catastrophe. This anguished awareness of our precarious survival on a brittle planet is characteristic of our time: the term 'Anthropocene' was first used by Eugene Stoermer and Paul Crutzen to define the current geological epoch, during which human actions are causing ecosystem collapse and the climate crisis. In the words of Amitav Ghosh, 'there was never a time [...] when the forces of weather and geology did *not* have a bearing on our lives — but neither has there ever been a time when they have pressed on us with such relentless directness' (Ghosh 2016, 59). This article seeks to examine the

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convergence of long-standing feminist views and burgeoning ecological concerns across Ferrante's fiction and thought. It will be argued that Ferrante inscribes herself in a current of ecofeminist thought that dates to the latter half of the twentieth century. In 1970, Carla Lonzi declared: 'Il movimento femminista non è internazionale ma planetario' (Lonzi 2010, 36) ['the women's movement is not international but planetary']. Four years later, the word 'ecofeminism' was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne, who maintained that the global issues of environmental degradation and women's oppression were intertwined and caused by patriarchy. Although the term is relatively new, Ariel Salleh writes that the ancient pulse behind it always propelled women's efforts to create life-affirming societies, 'from the Chipko forest dwellers of North India [...] 300 years ago to the mothers of coalmining Appalachia right now' (Salleh 2014, ix). Analysing Ferrante's Neapolitan Quartet alongside her essays, articles and interviews from 2008 to 2019, I will argue that, like Lonzi, d'Eaubonne and Salleh, the author has attributed the devastation of the planet to the epistemic and physical violence perpetrated by patriarchy and capitalism, which subjugate women while also polluting and destroying the earth. In conclusion, environmentalism and feminism will emerge as inextricable facets of Ferrante's writing.

### Elena Ferrante and Giacomo Leopardi

Ferrante's vision of nature is rooted in the literary corpus of Giacomo Leopardi (1798–1837). As Ferrante acknowledged in the essay '*Tremore*' ['*Trembling*'] from the collection *L'invenzione occasionale* (2019) [*Incidental Inventions* (2019)], her perception of the night sky as 'zeppo di mondi e tuttavia vuoto' (2019, 35) ['full of worlds and yet empty' (2019, 99)] has been inspired by the nineteenth-century philosopher and writer who died in Naples, whom she designates as 'il più straordinario dei poeti italiani' (2019, 35) ['the most extraordinary of Italian poets' (2019, 99)].

Lila's and Elena's cosmologies resonate with a Leopardian metaphysical disenchantment, with his uncompromising distrust of the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, and his unrelenting recognition of humanity's daunting insignificance in the face of natural forces. *La Ginestra* (1845) [*The Broom*], Leopardi's last lyric, expresses contempt for the myth of progress, depicting the earth as an inhospitable grain of sand suspended among clusters of stars. Revolving around two main metaphors — the broom, representing the human condition of terror and fragility, and Vesuvius, symbolizing the blind force of the universe — the poem designates Nature as a heartless nurse, whose womb spews out streams of lava that kill humans as if they were mere ants. Ferrante's protagonists live under the shadow of the active volcano, as Leopardi did in his final months, and, just like the broom, they are attuned to its tremendous power: 'qua c'è il Vesuvio che ti ricorda ogni giorno che la più grande impresa degli uomini potenti, l'opera più splendida, il fuoco, e il terremoto, e la cenere e il mare in pochi secondi te la riducono a niente' (2014, 419) ['Vesuvius (...) reminds you every day that the greatest undertaking of powerful men, the most splendid work, can be reduced to nothing in a few seconds by the fire, and the earthquake, and the ash, and the sea' (2014, 440)]. The tetralogy contains a reference to Leopardi's heterogeneous collection of writings titled *Zibaldone*: in her youth, Elena writes about the 'Leopardian garden' and, in agreement with the poet, declares that beauty is 'un inganno [...]. È cipria passata sopra l'orrore. Se la si toglie, restiamo soli col nostro spavento' (2012, 323) ['a sham, it's like face powder patted on over

the horror. If you take it away, we are left alone with our fear' (2013, 323)]. The narrator is discussing a journal entry from the spring of 1826, when Leopardi observed the ubiquity of pain even in the most delightful garden, where the blooming flowers inevitably conceal the auguries of death, such as a rose wilting in the scorching sunlight, or the decay of a tree infested with insects. In Ferrante's novels, as in 14 of Leopardi's *Canti*, the moon appears as the mute, remote spectator of human misfortune. Within the Neapolitan Quartet, two episodes appear to be particularly indebted to Leopardi's *Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia* (1831) [*Night Song of a Wandering Shepherd in Asia*] and its questioning of humanity's importance in the universe. In the first, Lila becomes the poet's equal in nihilism: gazing at the sky, she admits that she finds the night frightening because she cannot discern any meaningful design in the firmament. To her, the moon appears as a mere rock among billions of other rocks, and the constellations look like random shards of glass (2014, 234). As she stands on the Ischia beach in the darkness of night, Elena perceives herself as a minor fragment of the cosmos, and is similarly anguished by a world teeming with life, yet indifferent to her suffering:

La bellezza delle cose è un trucco, il cielo è il trono della paura; [. . . io] sono parte insieme a questa spiaggia, al mare, al brulichio di tutte le forme animali, del terrore universale; [. . .] sono la particella infinitesimale attraverso cui lo spavento di ogni cosa prende coscienza di sé. (2012, 289)

[The beauty of things is a trick, the sky is the throne of fear; (. . .) along with this beach, the sea, the swarm of animal forms, I am part of the universal terror; (. . .) I'm the infinitesimal particle through which the fear of everything becomes conscious of itself. (2013, 289)]

The anti-anthropocentric stance that underpins these reflections echoes Leopardi's *Dialogo di un Folletto e di uno Gnomo* (1827) [*Dialogue of an Imp and a Gnome*]: recent ecocritical studies have highlighted how this dialogue (among other works by Leopardi) ridicules the narcissistic belief that the world has been created for the sole benefit of humankind (Ceccagnoli 2019; Di Rosa 2019; Leydi 2022). And, like Leopardi, who personifies Nature in the shape of a giant woman in *Dialogo della Natura e di un Islandese* [*Dialogue of Nature and an Icelander*], Ferrante represents the environment of Naples as a damaged 'feminized' 'gestational space' (Walker 2021, 79). It is worth noting that the 1980 seismic event is envisioned by Lila as a torrent of menstrual blood and cancerous polyps (2014, 162) — an image that equates the polluted and devastated landscape of Naples to the body of a sickly woman.

Albeit sharing similar sentiments and insights to those of Leopardi, Ferrante builds on his work with a critique of the patriarchal nature-culture dualism, reflecting on an ecofeminist approach to the world - all aspects of Ferrante's work to which I will return in the course of this article. While her sustained and complex engagement with Leopardi would require further investigation, for the purpose of this study it is sufficient to observe that Ferrante's ecological poetics reformulates some of the essential traits of Leopardi's thought within a feminist framework, infusing them with the urgency of the climate crisis.

### The Cosmic Rot and the Fosso Carbonario

On 15 January 2008, Ferrante published her first work on environmental issues: 'Our Fetid City', a *New York Times* article about the waste crisis in Campania. Since the 1980s, when

the Camorra took over the garbage disposal system in the region, heavy metals, household litter and toxic waste have been buried illegally around Campania, poisoning water and food supplies, with disastrous consequences for the health of its inhabitants (Past 2013). For decades, Naples and its surrounding area have been plagued by the ecomafia's environmental crimes, including 'unauthorized building, animal racketeering, landscape destruction, illegal trade [...] of endangered plant and animal species, [and] the illegal recycling of waste' (Iovino 2009, 339). With despair that borders on hopelessness, 'Our Fetid City' describes the metropolis as an overflowing landfill, submerged by thousands of tons of garbage that 'has gone uncollected for three weeks' and is now 'piled up to the second floor of the houses' (*New York Times*, 15 January 2008). As the article notes, this polluted filth pervades the air with 'the evil odor of decomposition and burning waste', moving 'down the hills of refuse and slid[ing] along the streets, enter[ing] shops, doorways, houses' (*New York Times*, 15 January 2008). The mounds of profit-generating garbage seem to Ferrante 'the symbol of a cosmic rot', which 'underlines the precariousness of every sort of order, in every part of the planet' (*New York Times*, 15 January 2008). We find here an idea that is repeated throughout the Quartet: as a microcosm of the planet, Naples is 'a periphery that turns into a symbolic center, [...] anticipat[ing] the fates of Italy and Europe' (De Rogatis 2019, 94) and providing 'privileged access to a truth only beginning to be grasped by the world at large' (Glynn 2019, 282). For Ferrante, the mountains of waste are harbingers of the destruction that will eventually engulf the planet, revealing that environmental crime, in Naples as on earth, has become 'a destiny' (*New York Times*, 15 January 2008). This idea has since permeated the Neapolitan Quartet, voiced by Elena Greco: 'non è il rione a essere malato, non è Napoli, è il globo Terrestre, è l'universo' (2013, 19) ['it's not the neighbourhood that's sick, it's not Naples, it's the entire earth, it's the universe' (2014, 28)].

The tetralogy's Naples is the fetid city — a labyrinthine urban environment (Milkova 2021, 131–164) on the verge of disaster, damaged by male domination. As Glynn writes, Ferrante's 'Naples is a distinctly feminized and embodied entity' (2019, 263). And just as much as this 'feminine' urban space is afflicted by illness and scarred by mutilation, so are its female inhabitants: in the words of Wehling-Giorgi, 'a diseased cityscape and a wounded urban topography are mirrored in the fragmented and violated female bodies that populate the narrative' (2016, 207). The metropolis is represented as dirty, barren of civic duty, and infected by a mysterious malaise. Descriptions of disease and pollution are prevalent during Elena's stay in Naples between the years 1979 and 1995, a period that spans the onset of the waste crisis. Ferrante's women are vulnerable to the malaise that infects the city: while, in her adolescence, Elena is overcome by a 'disfunzione tattile' ['tactile dysfunction [...] un malessere resistente' (2011, 53) ['a tactile dysfunction [...] an enduring malaise' (2012, 57)], Lila is also frequently overwhelmed by nausea, mostly during her experiences of *smarginatura*. As a child, Lenù imagines the spreading of this sickness in the form of 'animali piccolissimi, quasi invisibili, che [...] uscivano dagli stagni [...] dalla polvere, ed entravano nell'acqua, e nel cibo e nell'aria, rendendo le nostre mamme, le nonne rabbiose come cagne assetate' (2011, 33) ['tiny, almost invisible animals that arrived in the neighbourhood at night, (...) entered the water and the food and the air, making our mothers, our grandmothers as angry as starving dogs' (2011, 38)]. From the *rione*, the malaise gradually seeps to the whole city, which becomes impregnated with

a poison that ‘erompeva in pustule di superficie, gonfie di veleno’ (2013, 19) [‘erupted in pustules on the surface, swollen with venom’ (2014, 27)]. In the light of the numerous references to the compenetration of sick bodies and contaminated city, to garbage, venom and pollution, the miasma becomes a sign of the waste crisis, and an indicator of the poisoning of Naples’ air, water and food. Consequently, the recurring malaise described by the narrator might signal the absorption of toxic waste into the matter of buildings, into food and water, and into the tissues of bodies. At the closing of the Quartet, the Fosso Carbonario emerges as a powerful symbol of the waste crisis, constituting ‘a *summa* for the tetralogy’s understanding of Naples’ (Glynn 2019, 276). As she researches the history of her city, Lila becomes captivated by the Fosso Carbonario, an ancient landfill and mass grave. Here, ‘si gettavano le bestie e le monnezze [...] si era cominciato a versare anche molto sangue di esseri umani’ (2014, 425) [‘they threw out beasts and garbage a lot of human blood was shed’ (2015, 446)]. This dumping ground and slaughterhouse, where dirty water, garbage and carcasses are commingled with the blood of men, appears as the manifestation of the ‘cosmic rot’ — a metaphor for a world ravaged by the patriarchal proclivity for violence that destroys life and pollutes the earth. As Lila declares: ‘L’intero pianeta è un grande Fosso Carbonario’ (2014, 426) [‘The entire planet is a big Fosso Carbonario’ (2015, 447)].

### ‘Cieli Neri’ and the Nightmare of Progress

The essay ‘*Cieli Neri*’ [‘*Black Skies*’] from the collection *L’invenzione occasionale* recounts Ferrante’s environmental epiphany, which occurred prior to the tetralogy’s publication. The event marked the margin between a ‘before’ and an ‘after’ in the author’s life. Since then, Ferrante reveals, the climate crisis has become an obsession.

Qualche decennio fa, ho cominciato a leggere [...] dei mutamenti climatici. [...] Possibile che l’animale uomo, questo pezzo infinitesimale della natura, nel corso della sua breve storia fosse riuscito a danneggiare irreversibilmente tutto il resto? Avevo imparato da ragazza che il progresso era illimitato [...]. Ora [...], sono diventata ossessiva, ripeto a tutti [...]: il livello del mare è salito, il ghiaccio si sta sciogliendo, i gas serra crescono, l’atmosfera s’è riscaldata ed è colpa nostra, colpa del modo di vivere e di produrre che ci è stato imposto, bisogna cambiare subito. Ormai detesto queste estati eterne, ho paura del caldo furibondo che comincia presto e non vuole mai finire. E mi atterriscono i cieli neri che vengono giù a cascata, facendo delle strade letti di fiumi e seppellendo persone e cose sotto la melma. (2019, 105–106)

[A few decades ago, (...) I began to read about climate change. (...) Was it possible the animal man, that infinitesimal piece of nature, in the course of his brief history had managed to damage irreversibly all the rest? As a girl I learned that (...) progress was unlimited (...). Now I’ve become obsessive. I repeat to friends and relatives: the sea level is rising, the ice is melting, greenhouse gases are increasing, the atmosphere is warming, and it’s our fault, the fault of the way of life and production imposed on us: it has to be changed immediately. (...) Now I hate these eternal summers, I’m afraid of the furious heat that starts early and won’t end. And the black skies with the rain cascading down terrify me, making streets into rivers, burying people and things under the mud. (2019, 307–311)]

The pursuit of growth and accumulation, Ferrante suggests, has led to the degradation of the planet and to its fragmentation into consumable resources. ‘*Cieli Neri*’ demonstrates

that Ferrante's critique of capitalism, a recurring theme within her fiction and her thought, is intrinsically bound up with her concerns about environmental catastrophe.

Ferrante had previously declared that what we call 'unlimited progress' is 'the great cruel squandering of the wealthy classes of the West', and that 'change will only happen when we prefer to take care of the entire planet and each of its inhabitants' (2016, 242). Elena Greco shares this indictment: upon leaving her hometown in 1995, she concludes bitterly that being Neapolitan means knowing that 'il sogno di progresso senza limiti è in realtà un incubo pieno di ferocia e di morte' (2014, 319) ['the dream of unlimited progress is in reality a nightmare of savagery and death' (2015, 337)]. An intertextual reading of the Quartet and '*Cieli Neri*', then, reveals the prevalence of climate change-related imagery and concerns in Ferrante's saga, establishing that her growing awareness of the environmental emergency exerted an influence on both her politics and imaginary. In the tetralogy, architectural symbols of neoliberalist progress rapidly metamorphose into ruins, suggesting that the capitalist promise of a better future has not been fulfilled. In the season of rains, the modern infrastructures built in the years of the 'Economic Miracle' are submerged by water, nearly washed away, or disintegrated by the assault of the elements. Elena lists the damages after a deluge and a landslide: the station has flooded, the Gallery has collapsed, there has been a power outage, and an entire building has folded on its side (2013, 17–19). The crumbling urban infrastructure fails to endure changes of seasons and meteorological phenomena: 'Lave d'acqua e liquami e immondizia e batteri si rovesciavano nel mare dalle colline cariche di costruzioni nuovissime e fragili, o erodevano il mondo di sotto' (2013, 17) ['lavas of water and sewage and garbage and bacteria spilled into the sea from the hills that were burdened with new, fragile structures' (2014, 25–26)]. Intense heat, black skies, violent downpours, the disintegration of buildings, people buried under the mud — all the weather events listed in '*Cieli Neri*' feature in the tetralogy. The presage of Naples as a modern Atlantis drowned by rising waters, lava, and rains haunts the text from the first volume, when Elena's and Lila's joyful escape into freedom is brought to a close by a storm akin to that described in '*Cieli Neri*', perhaps anticipating the impossibility of fleeing the *riotte*.

### Tremore' and Elena Ferrante's Ecofeminism

In '*Tremore*', Ferrante develops a philosophical reflection on the perils of human exceptionalism. Drawing a causal nexus between patriarchal anthropocentrism and environmental destruction, the essay expresses the possibility of an ecofeminist openness to nonhuman alterities:

Non mi piace la tronfia pochezza degli umani che si considerano creature elette, l'antropocentrismo [...] mi mette angoscia. Il castello dentro cui ci siamo chiusi dichiarandoci figli di Dio e perciò signori dell'universo mi pare un segno di tracotanza. Sento che tutto ciò che abbiamo lasciato fuori preme con forza. Per quanto potenziamo con accessori sempre più efficienti la nostra gabbia, tutto può sfaldarsi da un momento all'altro e le forme che abbiamo concepito [...] si riveleranno di ridicola insufficienza. [...] L'animale uomo deve fare autocritica, cercare nuovi equilibri. Il futuro che mi interessa è un futuro di assoluta apertura all'altro, a qualsiasi essere vivente, a tutto ciò che è attraversato dal soffio della vita. (2019, 35–37)

[I'm (...) frightened by the conceited small-mindedness of human beings when they consider themselves elect creatures, anthropocentrism pains me. I have no liking for the castle within which we have enclosed ourselves by declaring that we are beloved children of God and lords of the universe. No matter how much we strengthen our cage with ever more efficient accessories, everything can fall apart at any moment and the forms we have conceived (...) will prove to be of ridiculous insufficiency. The animal man has to be self-critical, pursue a new balance. The future that interests me is a future of absolute openness to the other, to any living being, to everything endowed with the breath of life. (2019, 99–100)]<sup>1</sup>

'*Tremore*' prompts us to relinquish the Cartesian credo of man's transcendent supremacy over nature that forms the bedrock of the Western epistemological framework — an anthropocentric logic that 'arrogates all intelligence and agency to the human while denying them to every other kind of being' (Ghosh 2016, 31).

According to Ferrante, the castle within which humans have sought shelter proves to be a cage that enforces an unwarranted and potentially lethal separation between self and nature. By using the masculine terms 'animale uomo', 'signori' and 'figli' (instead of, for instance, 'animale donna' or 'animale umano'), Ferrante evokes the image of a monolithic and monadic man, master of Creation. This linguistic choice underscores the patriarchal nature of anthropocentrism. Reinforcing this feminist critique is the Ferrantian formula of the 'male cage' — a spatial metaphor through which the author pictures the claustrophobic nature of 'a patriarchal society and an androcentric literary tradition' (Milkova 2021, 22). By employing this trope to illustrate human exceptionalism, Ferrante not only asserts the artificiality of the nature-culture dualism but also emphasizes the connection between patriarchal and anthropocentric modes of thinking: both arise from the narcissistic deification of the animal man, resulting in our entrapment within a cage that isolates us from nature, and impels us to dominate the nonhuman world. The rift between humans and nonhumans ushered in by this logic clearly operates according to a 'phallogocentric' dialectic, as defined by Derrida and Cixous: our understanding of the world, they suggest, is shaped through a series of hierarchical oppositions that centre man as the measure of all things, such as self vs. other, man vs. woman, or human vs. animal (Cixous 1996; Derrida 1978).

According to Timothy Morton, the 'Nature' that exists autonomously from humans is the function of aesthetic distance, or, in other words, a cultural construct deriving from such phallogocentric divisions: for Nature to exist, he notes, a separation must be introduced between the human self and the 'over yonder' (2010, 50). '*Tremore*' explicitly rejects both human exceptionalism and its corollary concept of 'Nature' as 'a reified thing in the distance' (2010, 10). Instead, Ferrante conceives of humans as fragments of matter among other matter, reliant on other entities and species, and inextricably interconnected with a multiplicity of other beings. Indeed, as Ferrara has convincingly argued, Ferrante apprehends 'reality as a conglomerate of living things in which human and nonhuman animals, matter, cultural and technological artefacts, cohabit' in a process that entails 'that subjectivities immersed in a constant flow of becoming are potentially always entangled with one another' (2020, 95). This awareness is shared by the brilliant friends Lila and Elena, who regard 'the world as an unstable, magmatic pulp of organic and inorganic matter' (2020, 95). Consequently, as we shall see in more detail, Ferrante's novels strive to overcome the dualistic frame of thought from which the Cartesian dualism of body and mind and the dichotomy between man and nature originate.



In this respect, Ferrante inscribes herself in a current of ecofeminist thought that links ‘the domination of “nature” [...] to the domination of “women”’ (Adams and Gruen 2014, 1): both have been historically marginalized, both have been misconstrued as mere resources, and both have ‘been partners on the same side of the philosophical dividing line between owner and owned, soul-possessing and soul-bereft’ (2021, 159). Within a misogynistic conceptual framework that privileges human over nonhuman and masculine over feminine, women and nature have been relegated to ‘a devalued and sharply demarcated sphere of otherness’, reduced to ‘a subhuman ontological status that exposes them to murderous violence’ (Plumwood 1993, 41). In Ynestra King’s definition, ecofeminism ‘uses its ecological perspective to develop the position that there is no hierarchy in nature: among persons, between persons and the rest of the natural world, or among the many forms of nonhuman nature’ (Adams and Gruen 2014, 2). Starting from the premise that both women and nature are exploited in the capitalist patriarchal system, Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies consider the devastation of the earth a feminist concern because both are caused by ‘the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies’ (Adams and Gruen 2014, 2). Ecofeminist philosophy is, then, geared towards creating a more equitable and inclusive society, attentive to every living being with whom we coexist on this planet. Within *Tremore*, Ferrante upholds this ecofeminist perspective, urging her readers to break free of the anthropocentric castle/cage, to defy the pernicious dichotomies of patriarchy and to embrace diversity, in both its human and nonhuman shapes.

However, it would be an oversimplification to reduce Ferrante’s stance towards the environment to pure benevolence: such a perspective does not account for her ambivalent feelings of dread and disgust towards her own animality — a sentiment that is often shared by her protagonists. In an interview, Ferrante illustrated the blend of fear and repugnance, coupled with moments of love and exhilaration which, in her view, characterizes women’s attitude towards the nonhuman:

Animals frighten us, repulse us, remind us - like pregnancy when suddenly it changes us, bringing us much closer to our animal nature - of the instability of the forms assumed by life. But later - much more than men - we admit them among our words, we take care of them as of children, cancelling out fear and disgust with love. [...] It’s the disgust induced by taboos. But we also have the capacity to push ourselves along, in contact with the living material, [...] where everything can happen. (2016, 222)

In a similar manner, *Vegetazione* [*Plants*] captures Ferrante’s anguish at the sudden realization of her own enmeshment with a world in peril. Set against the backdrop of burning forests, the essay suggests that plants are ‘un emblema [...] di tutte le infinite vittime di questo pianeta’ (2019, 84) [‘an emblem (...) of all the victims on this planet’ (2019, 244)] who fight for freedom and survival — ‘le provano tutte per proiettarsi altrove, si allungano, si torcono, si insinuano, spaccano la pietra’ (2019, 84) [‘they extend, twist, creep their way in, break the stone’ (2019, 244)]. In a turn of phrase, the distance between woman and nonhuman dissolves and Ferrante morphs into the vegetation, as she reveals that plants embody her own contradictions: they, like her, are alive yet trapped. While images of blazing forests cause her suffering, the growth of plants and trees at times disturbs and disgusts her, reminding her of the expansion of a tumour. Both passages support the notion that women have been historically situated in a liminal space between

humans and nonhumans, and thus are granted a vantage point in the relationship with nature. And while this interconnectedness of all sentient beings is laden with taboos that can provoke in women fear and repugnance, it can also offer a revolutionary margin for transformation, empathy and radical openness. Disgust, according to Nussbaum, reflects our 'interest in policing the boundary between ourselves and nonhuman animals, or our own animality' (Nussbaum 2001, 202). Repulsion, then, frequently occurs when the categories of human and nonhuman collapse. Beyond this initial response, which signals the crossing of a threshold between humanity and animality, lies a potentially liberating space where, in Ferrante's words, 'everything can happen'. As noted by Milkova, in Ferrante's novels, repugnance becomes a means for resistance to stifling and 'normative paradigms of motherhood and daughterhood', opening 'space for transgression and liberation so that feminine identity becomes slippery' (2013, 92). Likewise, Ferrante suggests that the awareness of our own deep embeddedness within the world can kindle fear and disgust, but it can also generate transformative openings, resulting in a breakdown of the dialectics of otherness and in the collapse of the nature-culture dualism.

The worldview espoused by Ferrante in '*Cieli Neri*', '*Tremore*' and '*Vegetazione*' can be considered ecofeminist because it is driven by her entwined feminist and environmental concerns. Ferrante advocates for more than an abandonment of the androcentric human, measure of all things, as she also encourages a feminist reorientation of the self to become equal, caring and entangled with nature, as opposed to superior, autonomous and detached. In doing so, Ferrante echoes the words of Ynestra King:

The survival of the species necessitates a renewed understanding of our relationship to nature, of our own bodily nature, and of nonhuman nature around us; it necessitates a challenging of the nature-culture dualism and a corresponding radical restructuring of human society according to feminist and ecological principles. (Cuomo 1998, 41)

In her commitment to absolute openness to the other and to the flourishing of everything endowed with the breath of life, Ferrante envisions an ecofeminist ethics, empathy and care for nature beyond the human.

### Carne da Macello: The Sexual Politics of Meat

In 2007, voicing her anger at the persistence of male domination, Ferrante declared: 'il patriarcato [...] tiene saldamente il pianeta nelle sue mani e tutte le volte che può si accanisce [...] a fare delle donne *carne da macello*' (Terragni 2007, emphasis mine) ['the patriarchy (...) holds the planet firmly in its hands and whenever it can it insists (...) on making women *meat to be butchered*']. This theme is explored in the tetralogy, where the practices of killing, butchering and eating animals are often connected to patriarchal violence that destroys both women and the earth. The novels are saturated by 'the perception that women and animals are similarly positioned in a patriarchal world, as objects rather than subjects' (Adams 2015, 157). Female and nonhuman characters share a connection to violence, a kinship rooted in their otherness and oppression, as is the case for the mothers and grandmothers of the neighbourhood who are likened to starving dogs. For this reason, in Ferrante's visual imagination, the butchering of meat functions primarily as a metaphor for the violence unleashed on women's bodies. In the capitalist

and patriarchal world of the Neapolitan Quartet, women and animals are presented as consumable ‘carne da macello’ (Terragni 2007). Truncated, mutilated and exploited female bodies are often associated with the slaughtered corpses of animals to reflect a social order that, in the words of Irigaray, ‘requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate’ (1985, 72).

Throughout the text, allusions to meat and butchery indicate the presence of evil, functioning as tropes for women’s oppression: from the grotesque description of Don Achille’s body as ‘grezzo e pesante di materie eterogenee, salami, provolone, mortadelle, sugna e prosciutto, sempre in forma di sciame’ (2011, 32) [‘a coarse body, heavy with a mixture of materials — emitting in a swarm salami, provolone, mortadella, lard and prosciutto’ (2012, 36)] to Lila’s and Silvia’s accounts of rape which remind Elena of animal cries of terror, motifs of meat and animality frequently emerge when women sustain abuse. The journals kept by Lila during her marriage with the violent Stefano Carracci are pervaded by massacre, haunted by the ghosts of dismembered women and filled with graphic descriptions of injuries that conjure up the process of animal slaughter.

Non scriveva mai *morirò ammazzata*, ma annotava fatti di cronaca nera, a volte li reinventava. Erano storie di donne assassinate, insisteva sull’accecamento dell’assassino, sul sangue dappertutto. E ci metteva i dettagli che i giornali non riportavano: occhi cavati dalle orbite, danni causati dal coltello alla gola o agli organi interni, la lama che trapassava la mammella, i capezzoli tagliati, il ventre aperto dall’ombelico in giù, la lama che raschiava i genitali. (2013, 343)

[She never wrote *I will die murdered*, but she noted local crime news, sometimes she reinvented it. In these stories of murdered women she emphasized the murderer’s rage, the blood everywhere. And she added details that the newspapers didn’t report: eyes dug out of their sockets, injuries caused by a knife to the throat or internal organs, the blade that pierced a breast, nipples cut off, the stomach ripped open from the bellybutton, the blade that scraped across the genitals. (2013, 343)]

Having suffered multiple assaults at the hands of Stefano, Lila envisions her own destiny in these fragmented body parts, and projects her fears on the meat she must cut, wrap and sell in her husband’s grocery store: ‘mentre taglio il salame penso a quanto sangue c’è nel corpo delle persone’ (2012, 144) [‘while I’m slicing salami I think how much blood there is in a person’s body’ (2013, 145)], she tells Lenù.

Having left Stefano, Lila is offered a job at Bruno Soccavo’s sausage factory, where women and nonhuman creatures are annihilated in ‘a cycle of objectification, fragmentation, and consumption’ (Adams 2015, 27). Ricciardi observes that ‘the Soccavo salami factory embodies for its occupants the involuntary reduction of life to little more than animal subsistence’ (2021, 98). Here, Lila is made to toil in divisions that evoke the circles in Dante’s *Inferno*: from the sausage-stuffing section (*insaccatura*) to the mixing department (*impastatoio*), to the gutting section (*spolpatoio*). In the meat-processing plant, the connection between the butchering of animals and violence against women becomes explicit: while female workers are dehumanized and harassed, meat is sexualized. As they process animal flesh for human consumption ‘in an atmosphere of heightened sexuality’ (Ricciardi 2021, 98), the proletarian women workers are molested. Lila’s boss reveals to her that the smell of drying salamis reminds him of the odour of sex before assaulting her in the seasoning room. In the mortiferous facility where animals are turned into

edible body parts, where living beings 'are rendered being-less' (Adams 2015, 27), the women workers endure sexual violence and mistreatment:

Ve l'immaginate, chiese [Lila] cosa significa passare otto ore al giorno immerse fino alla cintola nell'acqua di cottura della mortadella? Ve l'immaginate cosa significa avere le dita piene di ferite a forza di spolpare ossa d'animale? Ve l'immaginate cosa significa entrare e uscire dalle celle frigorifere [...]? [...] Le operaie devono farsi toccare il culo dai capetti e dai colleghi senza fiatare. Se il padroncino ne ha necessità, qualcuna deve seguirlo nella camera della stagionatura; [...] e lì, prima di saltarti addosso, quello stesso padroncino ti tiene un discorsetto collaudato su come lo eccita l'odore dei salumi. (2013, 106)

[Can you imagine, (Lila) asked, what it means to spend eight hours a day standing up to your waist in the mortadella cooking water? Can you imagine what it means to have your fingers covered with cuts from slicing the meat off animal bones? [...] The women have to let their asses be groped by supervisors and colleagues without saying a word. If the owner feels the need, someone has to follow him into the seasoning room; (...) and there, before he jumps all over you, (he) makes you a tired little speech on how the odour of salami excites him. (2014, 121–22)]

The tale of Lila's ordeal at this facility is one of the four sections that Ferrante had planned to include in the story at its inception, hence suggesting its centrality in the author's project (2016, 253). I contend that the importance of this episode for Ferrante lies in the emphasis it places on the entwined annihilation and mercification of women and nonhuman beings within patriarchy and capitalism — or, in Braidotti's words, 'the opportunistic transspecies commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism' (Braidotti 2017, 32). In fact, this segment illuminates the collusion of capitalism and patriarchal abuse through an exploration of societal consumption of both nonhuman and female bodies, relating the oppression of women workers and of animals to wider issues of labour and power. That the Soccavo factory is the property of crime lord Michele Solara ought to come as no surprise. The Solara brothers exemplify patriarchal masculinity; hence, their ownership of the meat-processing plant further cements the alignment between the cruelty against nonhuman beings, the capitalist exploitation of workers and male violence against women.

### Interspecies Friendships

From the tetralogy's inception, Lila stands out for her inability to remain inside the margins of the human. After attending Giuseppe Montalenti's lecture on Charles Darwin, Lila becomes enthralled by evolutionary theory, which seems to support her own beliefs about the absurdity of human exceptionalism: 'Non me lo voglio dimenticare più' disse [Lila]. 'Che sei una scimmia?' 'Che siamo animali'. 'Io e te?' 'Tutti' (2012, 147) ['I don't want to ever forget it' (Lila), said. 'That you're a monkey?' 'That we're animals'. 'You and I?' 'Everyone' (2013, 148)]. The allusion to *On the Origin of Species* (1859) is significant, for Darwin's study insisted on a biological continuum between human and animal, dealing a 'catastrophic blow to human privilege vis-à-vis the species question' (Rohman 2009, 1). Lila's conviction echoes in a passage from the English translation of *Tremore*: 'although we are animals among animals', Ferrante writes, 'we believe we have the right to enslave the rest of the living world. This makes us dangerous, and at the same time

ridiculous' (2019, 99). Similarly, Elena and Lila react with hilarity after Montalenti's talk, as they struggle to determine exactly what distinguishes them from apes:

"Ma lui ha detto che ci sono molte differenze tra noi e le scimmie." "Sì? E quali? Che mia madre mi ha fatto i buchi alle orecchie e perciò porto gli orecchini dalla nascita, mentre alle scimmie le madri non glieli fanno e orecchini non ne portano?" Da quel momento ci prese la ridarella, elencammo differenze di quel tipo, [...] sempre più assurde. (2012, 147)

["But he said there are a lot of differences between us and the apes." "Yes? Like what? That my mother pierced my ears and so I've worn earrings since I was born, but the mothers of monkeys don't, so their offspring don't wear earrings? A fit of laughter possessed us, as we listed differences, (...) each more ridiculous than the last. (2013, 148)]

In deriding the hierarchy that places the human in a position of superiority over other beings, Lila's worldview invites comparisons with anti-speciesism.

This encounter with evolutionary theory hastens Lila's mistrust of the category of humanity — a resistance that she also embodies. Part animal, part computer, part demon, part goddess — Lila is a zoological hybrid, a witch, a cyborg, a bird of prey, a snake, a ghost. Descriptions of Lila often underline her proximity to animality, at times representing her as a falcon. Her feral nature is established from the first volume, as Elena attributes her reptilian and bird-like characteristics by combining human and animal qualities:

La sua prontezza mentale sapeva di sibilo, di guizzo, di morso letale. [...] Gli occhi grandi e vivissimo sapevano diventare fessure dietro cui, prima di ogni risposta brillante, c'era uno sguardo che pareva non solo poco infantile, ma forse non umano. Ogni suo movimento comunicava che farle del male non serviva perché, comunque si fossero messe le cose, lei avrebbe trovato il modo di fartene di più. (2011, 44)

[Her quickness of mind was like a hiss, a dart, a lethal bite. (...) Her large, bright eyes could become cracks behind which (...) there was a gaze that appeared not very childlike and perhaps not even human. Every one of her movements said that to harm her would be pointless because (...) she would find a way of doing worse to you. (2012, 48)]

Gifted with the piercing vision of a bird of prey, Lila can observe what is invisible to others. As she transforms her wedding photograph, she metamorphoses into an all-seeing 'dea monocola' (2012, 126) ['a one-eyed goddess' (2013, 127)]. Throughout the tetralogy, this nonhuman attribute marks Lila as a prodigy, allowing her to master any task with remarkable speed and dexterity. Lenù follows Lila because in her bird-like gaze she recognizes the beacon that can lead her away from her oppressed mother's crossed eye: 'io cieca, lei un falco; io con la pupilla opaca, lei che da sempre stringeva gli occhi saettando sguardi che vedevano di più; io attaccata al suo braccio, tra le ombre, lei che mi guidava con uno sguardo rigoroso' (2011, 253) ['I was blind, she a falcon; I had an opaque pupil, she narrowed her eyes, with darting glances that saw more; I clung to her arm, among the shadows, she guided me with a stern gaze' (2012, 257)]. It is precisely Lila's border-crossing, her 'animal' qualities, that empower the narrator: endowed with feral vitality, Lila opens margins of freedom for Elena within the patriarchal *riione*. Throughout the Quartet, the title of 'brilliant friend' is continuously exchanged, attributed to or imposed on Lila by Lenu and vice-versa, in the hall of mirrors of a specular relationship characterized by splitting and doubling. According to Ferrara, by staging such an entanglement of identities and binding the protagonists into the enmeshed dyad Elena-Lila,

Ferrante creates posthuman characters who challenge anthropocentric paradigms (2020, 93–116). Additionally, the friendship between the protagonists can also be seen as a more-than-human alliance which dissolves the distinction between woman and animal, so that one flows into the other, becoming the other. This is especially true if we consider Lila's characterization as a snake and a falcon. By obfuscating the lines between different species and revealing the entanglement of all life forms, Ferrante explores the revolutionary potential of a more-than-human and ecofeminist alliance.

### Smarginatura

A *topos* of Ferrante's novels, *smarginatura* is the term Lila uses to describe her episodes of 'dissolving margins'. In these moments, Lila is possessed by 'a powerful feeling of entanglement with matter' (2016, 43) and perceives 'entità sconosciute che spezza[no] il profilo del mondo e ne mostra[no] la natura spaventosa' (2011, 87) ['unknown entities that break down the outline of the world and demonstrate its terrifying nature' (2012, 91)]. Drawing on Ferrara (2020, 93–116), Pinto (2020) and Di Rosa (2021, 143–163), who have described *smarginatura* as a posthuman and new materialist phenomenon, this occurrence may also be interpreted as a form of ecological awareness. If we note the similarities that exist between Ferrante's descriptions of *smarginatura* and her depictions of nature in the essays 'Cieli Neri', 'Tremore' and 'Vegetazione', the correlation between *smarginatura* and ecology becomes difficult to dismiss. It is significant that Lila is struck by her most severe episode during the natural catastrophe of 1980, as Vesuvius erupts and an earthquake shakes Naples. And, while the earthquake and the eruption cannot be classified as human-induced environmental disasters, this segment reproduces the same frightening dissolution of forms, shapes and boundaries, which, in Ferrante's ecological essays, occurs when nature infiltrates the anthropocentric cage. In fact, 'Cieli Neri', 'Tremore' and 'Vegetazione' illustrate the collision between the human and nonhuman realms in terms of an unravelling of margins over the backdrop of natural disasters: respectively, the first two essays hint at an apocalyptic scenario of societal breakdown, while the latter conjures up images of tumours and forests on fire. In these texts, empathy turns into horror when nonhuman entities push against the margins of the human and creep in, ready to unravel the order we have established. To some extent, these essays recount the same loss of one's bearings amidst an environment that is ablaze and in tumult, closing over us while it crumbles beneath our feet. The same also applies to Lila's last episode of *smarginatura* in the fourth volume of the tetralogy: cataclysms that wreak havoc and evoke the threat of societal collapse are juxtaposed with a disorienting and metamorphic merging and mixing of subjects and objects, as the contours of things and people bleed into each other. For Lila, the nature of *smarginatura* is absolutely material: this occurrence charts 'psychic landscapes that slide into physical, topographic spaces and vice versa' (Milkova 2021, 34), rooted in a reality 'of astonishing forces and energies' (Ricciardi 2021, 46).

Lila's experience is profoundly reminiscent of Morton's description of 'ecological thought', borne out by environmental awareness — a disconcerting and disorienting process that entails an emotional, psychological and material understanding of our enmeshment within the world. The inception of 'ecological thought' for Morton signifies 'becoming fully aware of how human beings are connected with other beings — animal, vegetable, or mineral' — a process that 'doesn't just occur in the mind' (2010, 7). What

Morton and Ferrante are describing is humanity's interaction with contaminated and uncontrollable surroundings, and our eerie and non-hierarchical experience of intimacy with matter and dependence on other species. It is plausible, then, that *smarginatura* has been infused with Ferrante's environmental consciousness. This occurrence may be considered a manifestation characteristic of the Anthropocene — a representation of our 'renewed awareness of the elements of agency and consciousness that humans share with many other beings, and even perhaps with the planet itself' (Ghosh 2016, 79). The phenomenon of *smarginatura*, above all else, underlines humanity's connectedness to the nonhuman, illustrating Ferrante's profound scepticism at the nature-culture dualism, which upholds 'the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity' (Moi 1985, 10). As Ferrante's women move beyond anthropocentrism, they become aware of their entanglement with a deeply damaged and ungovernable planet.<sup>2</sup>

According to Ghosh, the extreme weather events which increasingly haunt us are 'too powerful, too grotesque, too dangerous, and too accusatory to be written about in a lyrical, or elegiac, or romantic vein', as they often involve 'apparently inanimate things coming suddenly alive' (2016, 79). The upheaval caused by the climate crisis, Ghosh concludes, is 'peculiarly resistant to the customary frames that literature has applied to "Nature"' (2016, 79). *Smarginatura*, then, can also be ascribed to Ferrante's critique of the limitations of literary writing. The phenomenon may be understood as a de-anthropocentric strategy — an experimental effort to innovate the novel form in order authentically to represent our embeddedness in the world. Lenù refuses to accept that living means exploding into splinters, so, with her writing, she resolves to 'incollare un fatto a un altro con le parole, e alla fine tutto deve sembrare coerente anche se non lo è' (2014, 246) ['paste one fact to another with words, and in the end everything has to seem coherent even if it's not' (2015, 262)]. Seeking to comfort Lila, Elena reassures her that even after an earthquake, or an eruption, or *smarginatura*, the world then returns to its place — to which Lila responds, teasingly, 'quale posto?' (2014, 169) ['what place?' (2015, 183)]. When the narrator seeks to sanitize the facts, encasing them in beautiful prose and neatly organized texts, Lila swiftly exposes the ugliness and fragmentation that lurk behind:

"E che è il mare, da là sopra? Un po' di colore. Meglio se ci vai vicino, così ti accorgi che è monnezza, lota, pisciaccia, acqua impestata. Ma a voi che leggete e scrivete i libri vi piace dirvi le bugie." (2014, 120)

["What's the sea, from up there? A bit of colour. Better if you're closer; that way you notice that there's filth, mud, piss, polluted water. But you who read and write books like to tell lies". (2015, 131)]

*Smarginatura* functions in an analogous manner: by forcing the reader to recognize the repulsive, the confusing and the frightening, Ferrante breaks down the aestheticization that establishes a fracture between human and nature. In Morton's view, this is exactly what we need right now, ecologically speaking — a lingering with the terrible, disconcerting, disgusting and grief-inducing (2008, 189). Straying beyond human cognition, *smarginatura* elicits fear, revulsion, defamiliarization and estrangement. The uncanniness and obscurity of this occurrence stem from the fact that its description eschews trite expressions that might reaffirm human exceptionalism by taming and distancing nature, or by painting it as the mirror that reflects human fantasies and desires. *Smarginatura* could be then considered

a discursive strategy intended to break out of the cage of anthropocentrism, to manifest our immanence rather than our transcendence and to illuminate the fact that we are fragments among fragments of matter.

In conclusion, Elena Ferrante's literary corpus reflects on human responsibility for anthropogenic climate change. At the beginning of this article, I argued that much of Ferrante's meditation on nature has been influenced by Giacomo Leopardi: his philosophy serves as the foundation for Ferrante's ecological poetics, which, in turn, contextualizes Leopardi's concerns within the framework of patriarchy and the climate crisis. Next, through an analysis of the journalistic report 'Our Fetid City', I demonstrated that Ferrante's reflections on the Campania waste crisis have permeated the depiction of Naples in the tetralogy. Considering the essay collection *L'invenzione occasionale*, the article examined Ferrante's ecological thought: while '*Cieli Neri*' establishes the importance of the climate crisis as a framework for Ferrante's politics and poetics, '*Tremore*' conveys the fundamental outlines of her ecofeminist ethics of compassion for the flourishing of life beyond the human. Observing that the butchering of meat functions as a metaphor for patriarchal violence and interpreting the friendship between the Quartet's protagonists as an interspecies alliance, I explored the tetralogy's critique of human exceptionalism, which operates through a blurring of the margins that separate women and animals. Last, *smarginatura* is understood as an ecological literary experiment: rather than engaging in an aesthetic or anthropomorphizing contemplation of the nonhuman world that entails remoteness, Ferrante reminds us of our enmeshment with all nonhuman beings. Avoiding essentialist definitions of femininity, the novels explore the connections between women, nonhuman animals and their concurrent oppressions, proposing an ecofeminist ethics of interspecies solidarity and care on a damaged planet.

## Notes

1. The Italian and the English versions of this essay are different. For this reason, I integrated Ann Goldstein's translation with my own, adding sentences that can only be found in the Italian version of this text.
2. It is worth noting that *frantumaglia*, one of the key concepts in Ferrante's work, is inextricably tied to *smarginatura* (see Milkova 2021, 27–60). Both phenomena describe posthuman entanglements of violated female bodies, minds, and landscapes. Therefore, we might trace the inception of Ferrante's ecofeminist thought to as early as her use of the term *frantumaglia*.

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## Notes on Contributor

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