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My brilliant city: Naples, urban poverty and the 'ethnographic imagination' of Elena Ferrante

Mario Trifuoggi [a] and Francesco Sielo [b]

aGoldsmiths University of London, UK; bUniversità degli Studi della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli, Italy

ABSTRACT

Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels', published in English between 2012 and 2015, tell the coming-of-age story of two women born in a poor neighbourhood in post-war Naples. The international success of this four-part series of novels – named in the Italian edition after the title of the first novel, *L'amica geniale* ('My Brilliant Friend') – testifies to the enduring popularity of the urban poor of Naples as a literary subject. This article discusses several key issues of urban poverty that emerge from the series (i.e. social exclusion, ghettoization, widespread illegality, endemic violence and women's oppression) and analyses how they are narrated, drawing on two classic texts of ethnographic scholarship: Thomas Belmonte's *The Broken Fountain* (1979) and Italo Pardo's *Managing Existence in Naples* (1996). In doing so, it reconsiders Ferrante's narrative from a socio-anthropological perspective and assesses her 'ethnographic imagination' vis-à-vis two opposing tendencies in the literature about the urban poor of Naples: one geared towards stigmatization and the other towards romanticization. The article thus argues that the 'Neapolitan Novels' offer a refreshing take on a deeply stereotyped subject, countering (at least in part) the process of 'othering' that traditionally affects the literary representation of Naples' urban poor.

RIASSUNTO

La saga letteraria de 'L'amica geniale' di Elena Ferrante, tradotta e pubblicata in inglese tra il 2012 e il 2015, racconta la storia di due donne cresciute in un quartiere povero della Napoli del dopoguerra. Il successo internazionale della tetralogia testimonia la perdurante popolarità di un tema letterario - quello della subalternità delle classi popolari napoletane - che ha una lunga storia alle spalle. Questo articolo discute alcuni aspetti chiave di questo tema che emergono nella tetralogia (cioè l'esclusione sociale, la ghettizzazione, l'illegalità diffusa, la violenza endemica e l'oppressione femminile) e li esamina alla luce di due classici della ricerca etnografica sulla povertà a Napoli: *The Broken Fountain* di Thomas Belmonte (1979) e *Managing Existence in Naples* di Italo Pardo (1996). L'intento dell'articolo è analizzare la narrazione di Ferrante da una prospettiva socio-antropologica, soffermandosi sulla "immaginazione etnografica" dell'autrice rispetto a due tendenze opposte che storicamente dominano

la letteratura sulle classi popolari napoletane: una orientata alla stigmatizzazione e l'altra alla romanticizzazione della povertà. In tal senso, l'articolo sostiene che la saga de 'L'amica geniale' segna una rottura importante col passato, discostandosi (almeno in parte) dagli stereotipi che affliggono la rappresentazione letteraria delle classi popolari napoletane.

1. Introduction

The construction of Naples as 'other' to modern Europe played a central role in the cultural history of the Old Continent (Moe 2002). In particular, the literary representation of the urban poor of Naples as morally backward was one of the key themes of the 'Southern Question', that is, the political discourse about the north–south divide in post-unification Italy (Dines 2012). To date, the 'Southern Question' remains an unresolved issue of the Italian unification process: not only is the north–south divide still there (and widening again: Odoardi and Muratore 2019), but a moralistic tone continues to emerge from the discourse about it, fuelling deep-rooted forms of internal orientalism (Chambers 2015; Schneider 1998).

Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels', published in English between 2012 and 2015, fit into this debate, adding to a long list of fiction and non-fiction texts that narrate the 'Southern Question' in Italian popular culture. This four-part series of novels – named in the Italian edition after the title of the first novel, *L'amica geniale* ('My Brilliant Friend') – tells the coming-of-age story of two women born in a poor neighbourhood in post-war Naples. It addresses several key issues of urban poverty, including social exclusion, ghettoization, widespread illegality, endemic violence and women's oppression. Like other texts about the 'Southern Question', Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels' can be said to be informed by a kind of 'ethnographic imagination' (Atkinson 1990) or aesthetic sensitivity to social realism. This calls for a critical examination of her narrative in relation to the problem of 'othering' in the literary representation of the urban poor of Naples: what accounts for their condition in the 'Neapolitan Novels'? How does their characterization relate to the forms of internal orientalism that have traditionally affected this deeply stereotyped subject?

This article aims to answer these questions by analysing how the 'Neapolitan Novels' narrate the experience of urban poverty by drawing on two classic texts of ethnographic scholarship, namely Thomas Belmonte's *The Broken Fountain* (1979) and Italo Pardo's *Managing Existence in Naples* (1996). In doing so, it reconsiders Ferrante's narrative from a socio-anthropological perspective and assesses her 'ethnographic imagination' vis-à-vis two

opposing tendencies in the literature on urban poverty in Naples: one geared towards stigmatization and the other towards romanticization. Accordingly, the article compares her 'ethnographic imagination' with that of other prominent authors (mainly Giuseppe Marotta, Curzio Malaparte and Anna Maria Ortese), arguing that the relationalist tenor of the 'Neapolitan Novels' represents a highly innovative way of approaching the literary theme in question.

2. The problem of realism in the literary representation of Naples' urban poor

2.1 From the first meridionalisti to post-war writers

Between the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the miserable living conditions of Naples' urban poor became a source of inspiration for many European poets, writers and intellectuals. The often-picturesque description of Naples' so-called *lazzaroni* (plebs), a vast and variegated class of severely marginalized people, featured in the travel journals of eminent authors such as Dumas, Goethe, Lamartine, Stendhal and others who embarked on the customary Grand Tour that influenced a considerable part of the cultural history of modern Europe (Moe 2002). However, it is in the context of the Italian unification process that the literary representation of Naples' urban poor emerged as a political question. In the aftermath of the Risorgimento, the moral leaders of the new-born Italian nation urged journalists and writers 'equipped with a noble spirit' to visit Naples to 'depict the life and moral conditions' of the city and 'denounce them to the civilized world as an Italian crime' (Villari 1872, 17). As a result, Naples became one of the literary epicentres of the first generation of the so-called *meridionalisti* (southern reformers), who were concerned with Italy's 'Southern Question' (Dines 2012).

Contrary to the appealing tone of the literature on the Grand Tour, which often exoticized and softened the hardship of living in southern Italy, the writings of the *meridionalisti* were committed to delivering extensive accounts of what they considered a national emergency. This aesthetic sensitivity to social realism also influenced *verismo* (realism), a key movement of the Italian literary scene of the time, blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction in the discourse on the 'Southern Question' (Baldini 2017). Naples' urban poor, for instance, took the centre stage thanks also to novels such as Francesco Mastriani's *I vermi* ('The Worms', 1864) and Matilde Serao's *Il ventre di Napoli* ('The Belly of Naples' 1884), which mixed real and fictive characters and events. However, the eventual rise of fascism could not but halt the production of literary works of this kind given that the propaganda machine considered realism as a threat to the consensus on the Fascist regime (Bonsaver 2007).

In the aftermath of World War II and following the collapse of the Fascist regime, realism returned to the centre of Italian popular culture, as the international success of *neorealismo* (new realism) demonstrates – especially in filmmaking. In this respect, a new layer was added to the literary representation of Naples' urban poor, whose fight for survival was intensified by the devastation of the war. Between the 1940s and the 1950s, the *lazzaroni* made their literary comeback as victims of the war economy who struggled to keep up with the country's reconstruction and modernization. In novels such as Anna Maria Ortese's *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ('Neapolitan Chronicles' [1953] 2018) and Curzio Malaparte's *La pelle* ('The Skin' [1949] 1952), this characterization rested upon vivid and sometimes grotesque descriptions of wild behaviour and abominable sexual habits, as if they were more animal than human. In Giuseppe Marotta's *L'oro di Napoli* ('The Gold of Naples' [1947] 1960), on the other hand, the characterization of Naples' urban poor pointed in the opposite direction; here, their oddity seemed to testify to a higher degree of humanity and solidarity emerging in circumstances of existential threat.

However, the new generation of Neapolitan writers who emerged later in the 1950s were baffled by what appeared to be the recurrent opposition between two tendencies in the literary representation of Naples' urban poor: one geared towards stigmatization and the other towards romanticization. Domenico Rea (1983), for example, considered Marotta's narrative too indulgent and sweet, as if the proverbial *arte di arrangiarsi* ('the art of making do') of the allegedly good-hearted poor of Naples could compensate for their miserable living conditions. Conversely, Raffaele La Capria (1986) found both Ortese and Malaparte too harsh towards their characters, whose descriptions were often unforgiving and dehumanizing. In sum, the dualistic way in which the experience of urban poverty in Naples had been narrated until then was being questioned from a new perspective that – along the lines of the interdisciplinary approach of contemporary cultural studies – was linked to a much broader critique of the deep-rooted forms of internal orientalism affecting Italy's south at large (Chambers 2015; Schneider 1998).

Against this background, Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels' offer a compelling case study. After the tepid reception of the Italian edition, the international success of the English edition urged Italian critics to reconsider the cultural value and impact of this four-part series (Avalle 2021; Schwartz 2020). In particular, they attribute the novels' success to the presence in Ferrante's narrative of two key socio-anthropological aspects: the effective description of the city's peculiar configuration and the convincing construction of the main characters' female subjectivity (De Rogatis 2018). It is therefore worth examining how Ferrante handled these and other aspects that are relevant to the problem of realism in the literature about Naples' urban poor from a socio-anthropological perspective.

2.2 Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels'

Is it possible to rise above poverty culturally and mentally, even before doing so from a material viewpoint? This is the key question that Elena Greco – the narrator of the 'Neapolitan Novels' – asks herself throughout the story of which she is the protagonist, along with her childhood friend Lila Cerullo. The girls grew up in an unspecified poor neighbourhood on the outskirts of Naples, antonomastically called *rione* throughout the four novels; the fact that Elena manages to enter the best Italian universities (in the north) and become an established writer despite coming from a *rione* seems to suggest that this is indeed possible. Yet, throughout her life, Elena continues to feel oppressed by her humble origins, suffering from an eternal inferiority complex. Moreover, Elena is the proverbial exception that confirms the rule of the context in which she grew up, where no one else succeeds in achieving such a life trajectory – not even Lila, by far the most talented inhabitant of the entire *rione*.

Whatever field Lila puts her mind to, be it studying or doing manual labour, she outshines everyone around her. However, her brilliance – which at times touches upon the magical – is of little or no use when confronted with the material and human misery of the neighbourhood, where an inescapable destiny awaits her. It is precisely this aspect of the plot, in which it is the 'brilliant friend' who is eventually left behind, that explains the novel's socio-anthropological strength. On the one hand, what emerges is the very objectivity of the poverty trap on which Elena – in the very way that she escapes it – places narrative and statistical emphasis, showing that not individual merit does not determine patterns of social mobility at an aggregate level. On the other hand, the story also reveals the subjective experience of that trap, which is expressed not only in Lila's vulnerability before the *rione*'s physical violence but also in that of Elena before the symbolic violence of the ruling classes, by which she cannot help but feel intimidated despite her social rise.

In this context, the 'Neapolitan Novels' offer a perfect example of the marginalization of Naples' urban poor, for example in the intersection of class and gender inequalities that affect Lila's life trajectory. In terms of class inequalities, poverty forces Lila to leave school after primary education. She is neither sustained by her parents – for whom education is both a mental and an economic luxury – nor encouraged by the school, represented by the teacher Oliviero, who condemns the proud attitude with which Lila refuses to consider poverty a fault (contrary to the less brilliant but humbler Elena). With regard to gender inequalities, despite her indomitable spirit, Lila is forced to bend to the will of the *rione*'s men and marry – at a very young age – one of her many suitors. Her father, brother, husband and employers all use poverty to treat Lila's femininity as

a means to their ends, forcing her to pay not only for her social background but also, and even more so, for being a woman.

Lila's trajectory raises questions about the social and political limits of urban poverty. Whether it is intelligence, dedication or physical beauty, her virtues alone seem insufficient to guarantee a better life let alone overturn the rules of the *rione*. Lila's strong desire not to comply with the people who, even with criminal means, impose those rules on her regularly yields not so much to the moral blackmail of a loved one, who derives a selfish benefit from the application of those rules, as to the social blackmail of an entire neighbourhood that depends on them for its survival. In this regard, how can we explain the obstinacy with which Lila always seeks new ways of bypassing the rules of the *rione*? Is it the *resistance* of someone who – contrary to Elena, who allows herself to be absorbed by the same system that created the poverty of the neighbourhood the girls grew up in – uncompromisingly opposes capitalism, like the untameable *scugnizzi* (street urchins) romanticized in Pasolini's provocative description of Naples as 'the last plebeian metropolis' (1983, 18)? Or is it rather the *desistance* of someone who – unlike her neighbour Pasquale Peluso, who tries to change the system through trade union activities, party actions and eventually armed struggle – fails to develop class consciousness and act collectively, like the 'dangerous classes' stigmatized by Marx and Engels (1848) in the Communist Manifesto?

2.3 A socio-anthropological perspective

Over the years, many social scientists have addressed the problem of defining the social and political limits of Naples' urban poor in the space between the two extremes outlined above, often resorting to ethnographic methods to unpack the perspective of their objects of research (hence without straying too far from the narrative mechanisms of a novel). In *The Broken Fountain* (1979), for example, the American anthropologist Thomas Belmonte described the hardships, suffering and violence linked to the struggle for survival of some severely deprived families living in a poor neighbourhood in the historical centre of Naples, anticipating many aspects of neighbourhood life as depicted in the 'Neapolitan Novels'. In the wake of Edward Banfield's famous 'amoral familism' theory (1958), which explained the backwardness of southern Italy by the southerners' reluctance to put aside personal interests and cooperate for the common good, Belmonte proposed an anthropology of Naples' urban poor from which there seems to be no escape. No or little trace of social and political agency can be found in the subjects of his study: only a compulsion to repeat the selfish behaviour that Ferrante's character Lila tries in vain to resist. By contrast, in *Managing Existence in Naples* (1996), Italo Pardo – an anthropologist who received part of his education in Naples –

drew a very different conclusion from his ethnographic study of another poor neighbourhood located next to that studied by Belmonte. Pardo saw more than a crude struggle for bare life in the occasionally even dangerous behaviours of the subjects of his study; he outlined the moral basis not of backwardness but of a heterodox social and economic entrepreneurialism that, regardless of the folklore associated with the aforementioned *arte di arrangiarsi*, is a strategic part of the struggle for a better life. From this viewpoint, Naples' urban poor – although not necessarily conditioned by Lila's rebellious impulses in the novels – deploy alternative forms of social and political agency that, for Pardo and others, would raise hopes for a more radical democratic development than that allowed by the bourgeois institutions of the modern state.

There is an almost paradigmatic contrast between Pardo's and Belmonte's theories when it comes to the problem of defining the poor inhabitants of Naples as political or apolitical, revolutionary or reactionary, actors. Belmonte may have underestimated the agency of the participants in his study also as a result of his personal and academic biography: in the United States, the urban poor have long been known as an 'underclass', a relatively recent capitalistic product of the merciless processes of socio-spatial exclusion, whose intersection of ethnic and class inequalities is (still) unparalleled in Europe (Wacquant 2008).[1] Conversely, the Neapolitan background of Pardo may have represented an epistemic advantage in discerning alternative forms of agency deployed by the local urban poor, who keep experiencing various forms of 'perverse inclusion' (e.g. patronage, clientelism) linked to the city's informal structure of opportunities. It is no coincidence that, in his English ethnography, Pardo carefully avoided the notion of 'underclass', opting instead for the Italian *popolino* (plebs), with the precise intention of overturning its usually offensive connotation. However, this reversal of meaning can easily lead to the opposite mistake: that of romanticizing the urban poor. As demonstrated by various qualitative and quantitative studies on the impact of deindustrialization and the dismantling of the welfare state on poverty dynamics in Naples (Goddard 1996; Morlicchio and Pugliese 2006), the agency of the people studied by Pardo and Belmonte – as well as that of the characters of the 'Neapolitan Novels', from Ferrante's perspective – increased and decreased depending, firstly, on macro changes in the social and economic structure.

In short, if Belmonte seems to underestimate the agency of Naples' urban poor, Pardo underrates the structure that defines its transformative potential. What the two scholars had in common as modern anthropologists, however, is the literary convention of realism that informs the narrative of their accounts – what Paul Atkinson (1990) called 'ethnographic imagination'. In relation to the problem of 'othering', which traditionally affects the literary representation of Naples' urban poor and Italy's south in general, we could

therefore provocatively ask what kind of 'ethnographic imagination' informs Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels' (especially if compared to that of some of her predecessors, including Ortese, Marotta and Malaparte). Is her characterization of the poor of Naples closer to Belmonte's 'underclass' or Pardo's *popolino*? And how does it relate to the forms of internal orientalism that traditionally affect this deeply stereotyped theme?

3. The 'ethnographic imagination' in Elena Ferrante's works

3.1 Poverty, capitalism and modernity

Urban poverty is conventionally described as a condition of social and economic marginality caused by the population shift from rural to urban areas that accompanied industrialization. In this respect, Ferrante's choice to set the 'Neapolitan Novels' in a relatively new neighbourhood on the outskirts of Naples seems to be aimed at avoiding the exoticism that often informs the description of the inner-city neighbourhoods and bringing out the features that the *rione* might have in common with many other modern cities. Unlike the objects of Pardo's and Belmonte's studies, who navigate through centuries-old buildings and streets located in the city centre, Ferrante's characters grow up amidst modern apartment blocks that are cut off from central Naples. Elena and Lila do not even have visual access to the sea; in fact, they experience a form of socio-spatial exclusion that is hard to find in Naples' historic centre, where a more socially mixed urban environment often mitigates the marginalization of the poor.[2]

Setting the story in an unspecified poor neighbourhood rather than the city's iconographic historic centre served to generalize the characters' experience of urban poverty and emphasize its connection to the modernization of post-war Italy, which is one of the main motives of the 'Neapolitan Novels'. In fact, Ferrante seems at odds with modernization per se, describing it as a global process of dispossession and exploitation of which the *rione* is no more than a metaphor:

> Leave, instead. Get away for good, far from the life we've lived since birth. Settle in well-organized lands where everything really is possible. I had fled, in fact. Only to discover, in the decades to come, that I had been wrong, that it was a chain with larger and larger links: the neighborhood was connected to the city, the city to Italy, Italy to Europe, Europe to the whole planet. And this is how I see it today: it's not the neighborhood that's sick, it's not Naples, it's the entire earth, it's the universe, or universes. And shrewdness means hiding and hiding from oneself the true state of things. (Ferrante 2014, 28)

This narrative seems to run counter to that of the genealogically anti-modern *lazzaroni*, placing Ferrante close to Belmonte's thesis of the 'underclass': urban poverty is a global phenomenon because the capitalist system that

produces it has become global, conflating with modernity as such. Seen in this light, it arguably echoes the 'ethnographic imagination' of one of her predecessors, Malaparte, whose account of the dramatic impoverishment of Naples in the aftermath of World War II focused entirely on the disruptive impact of the Allied intervention – not so much as a result of bombings but in terms, rather, of the materialistic values that the Allies imported from the United States.

In *La pelle* ([1949] 1952), Malaparte represents the Allies as essentially devoid of humanistic culture and committed only to making a profit. The graphic description of the exploitative practices conducted to the detriment of the poor – and especially female – citizens of Naples is followed by a disheartened judgement of the moral corruption that spread among the latter, stripping them of any agency except in the desperate struggle to survive:

> It is a humiliating, horrible thing, a shameful necessity, a fight for life. Only for life. Only to save one's own skin. It is no longer a fight against oppression, a fight for freedom, for human dignity, for honour. It is a fight against hunger [. . .] To live, men will perform the meanest actions; to live, they will stoop to every sort of infamy, every sort of crime. For a crust of bread we are ready, all of us, to sell our own wives, or own daughters, to defile our own mothers, to sell our brothers and friends, to prostitute ourselves to other men. (Malaparte [1949] 1952, 36)

In this hopeless fight, there is no room for what Pardo described as the struggle for a better life. Just like Ferrante's characters, those of Malaparte only abide by one principle of behaviour: every *man* for *him*self (a principle with an implicit but unforgiving gendered dimension). Unlike Ferrante, though, Malaparte draws a clear line between Naples' urban poor before and after the war: before the encounter with the Allies, they still belonged – in his opinion – to an 'ancient civilization' ([1949] 1952, 32), the persistence of which had spared Naples from the horrors of modernity; in the aftermath of the war, they suddenly became exposed to the logic of capitalism, without having had the time to adjust. Hence, the same people whose condition of marginality had given them, according to Malaparte, the resources to uphold their dignity during the war ended up abandoning all modesty and surrendering to greed before the promise of purely material well-being:

> Once upon a time men endured hunger, torture, the most terrible sufferings, they killed and were killed, they suffered and made others suffer, to save their souls, to save their own souls and the souls of others [. . .] Today they suffer and make others suffer, they kill and are killed, they do wonderful things and dreadful things, not to save their souls, but to save their skins. (Malaparte [1949] 1952, 105)

Malaparte claims that 'nothing of this kind had ever been seen in Naples before' ([1949] 1952, 12). The city's inhabitants were used to having to adapt to new conquerors over and over again, and while the former pretended to bend to their laws, in reality, it was the latter who were ensnared in the local way of life.³ This did not, however, apply to the Allies, as the logic of capitalism was too powerful to resist:

> It's not a question of being honourable, it means nothing to be a man of principle. It isn't a matter of personal honour. It's modern civilization, this godless civilization, that makes men attach such importance to their own skins. One's skin is the only thing that counts now. The only certain, tangible, undeniable thing is one's skin. (Malaparte [1949] 1952, 106)

For Malaparte, it is the superimposition of capitalism and modernity – the pillars of a 'godless civilization' – that ultimately dictates the miserable living conditions of Naples' urban poor. Ferrante, for her part, deviates from Malaparte's apocalyptic perspective to the extent that she focuses on the issues of modernization yet does not oppose them to the myth of the noble savage. In other words, Ferrante's narrative makes no clear distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' poverty. For example, Lila's comprehension that the accumulation of wealth and the rise of inequality in the *rione* depend on 'what had happened before' (Ferrante 2012, 163) go further back in time than World War II. Most importantly, Ferrante acknowledges that the materialistic values stigmatized by Malaparte are the attributes of a broader logic of social stratification: Elena learns early on that the general rule of life in the *rione* is to 'make it difficult for others before they made it difficult for us' (Ferrante 2012, 37), but this is presented as an atavistic, cross-class trait of human relations rather than the mere fruit of the poisonous tree of modern capitalism.

Ferrante's pessimism about human relations emerges in many episodes of physical and psychological violence that, in the 'Neapolitan Novels', lead to the submission of the weak to the arrogance of the strong within the family unit as well as between neighbours, friends and strangers, regardless of their social class or status. Unlike members of the upper classes, though, the characters from the *rione* seem stuck in a loop of grievances and acts of retaliation that prevent them from obtaining any actual improvement through that violence. This resonates with Belmonte's description of the 'culture of poverty' in which the subjects of his study would be stranded, that is, a sense of one's place in the world inhibiting even the imagination of a better life, as Elena bitterly understands when Lila gives in to marrying one of her suitors:

> At that moment [during the wedding] I knew what the plebs were, much more clearly than when, years earlier, [the teacher Oliviero] had asked me. The plebs were us. The plebs were that fight for food and wine, that quarrel over who

should be served first and better, that dirty floor on which the waiters clattered back and forth, those increasingly vulgar toasts. The plebs were my mother, who had drunk wine and now was leaning against my father's shoulder, while he, serious, laughed, his mouth gaping, at the sexual allusions of the metal dealer. They were all laughing, even Lila, with the expression of one who has a role and will play it to the utmost. (Ferrante 2012, 329)

Following Elena's line of thought, poverty is not just a condition of social and economic marginality: it is a mental and behavioural system, a view of the world and one's place in it, which one can never leave. This is why Elena keeps struggling with her identity vis-à-vis her social mobility and Lila, despite her pristine talent, evokes feelings of discouragement and bitterness in the teacher Oliviero.

3.2 Social class and habitus

The sense of one's place in the world that haunts Elena throughout the 'Neapolitan Novels', clouding over the story of her social mobility, corresponds to the concept of habitus, which the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) defined as a durable set of perceptions and dispositions rooted in family upbringing and instinctively orienting one's behaviour within specific fields of social action: the neighbourhood, the school, the workplace and so forth. When social mobility uproots someone from their class, raising them to a higher social position, the disorientation of their habitus provokes what Bourdieu (2000) called *hysteresis*, which is precisely the kind of identity crisis that Elena experiences during higher education and that never abandons her afterwards.

In certain respects, the detailed description of Elena's 'cleft' habitus – her constant feeling of being out of place – highlights the 'culture of poverty' that, by contrast, would hold down her neighbours regardless of the actual opportunities to escape marginalization. In this sense, Ferrante's 'ethnographic imagination' is more similar to that of Ortese than it is to Malaparte's. In *Il mare non bagna Napoli* ([1953] 2018), Ortese tends to frame poverty as an innate, hereditary condition – the result of a 'silence of reason' (2018, 100) that brings out the worst aspects of human nature. In fact, her characters are not even described as human beings but as 'husks' (103), 'maggots' (70) and 'faceless men and women' (89) devoid of any rationality:

All those living creatures who dragged themselves along in a continuous motion resembling the actions of someone with a fever, or the nervous mania that possesses certain beings [. . .] that great husk of a crowd, those people [. . .] was always stirring, always disturbing the archaic calm of the landscape, and, mixing human decadence with the immutable decency of things, drew from it that ambiguous smile, that sense of death taking place, of life on a plane different from life, arising from corruption alone. (Ortese [1953] 2018, 103)

Accordingly, the distinction between the rich and the poor is allegedly a natural one, whereby the miserable living conditions of the latter existed independently of the wealth and privileges of the former:

> There was no acknowledgment of the presence of these lower classes on the faces of the bourgeoisie, but it was still a terrible thing [. . .] I told myself that two things must have happened a long time ago: either the people had, like the volcano, opened up and vomited forth these more refined people, who, just like something natural, cannot see something else that is natural; or this category of humans, which was, by the way, rather limited, had, in order to save themselves, renounced the ability to see the common people as living beings who were a part of themselves. Perhaps neither of these forces, born of nature, ever considered the possibility of revolt against its holy laws. (Ortese [1953] 2018, 156–157)

Dehumanization is at the heart of Ortese's reification of the 'culture of poverty', which she narratively constructs as a monolithic set of hereditary, individual attributes floating above history and society.[4] Early on in the 'Neapolitan Novels', Ferrante too dehumanizes some of her characters, like Don Achille, 'the ogre of fairy tales [. . .] a being created out of some unidentifiable material, iron, glass, nettles, but alive, alive, the hot breath streaming from his nose and mouth' (2012, 27-28). Here, however, dehumanization is only an imaginative device employed by two children, Elena and Lila, who grow up in fear of the neighbourhood's criminal boss. As soon as they enter adulthood, Ferrante's narrative shifts towards a much more nuanced account of the relationship between good and evil; in doing so, it historicizes crime as one of the by-products of social inequality by repeatedly stressing the *rione*'s cultural and economic subordination to the bourgeoisie that inhabits the centre of Naples. In sum, Ferrante associates her characters' attributes with their positions in the social space of the city rather than their allegedly natural inclinations, imparting a relationalist tone to her literary representation of Naples' urban poor.

Contrary to substantialism, which tends to reify the culture of specific communities or territories (e.g. the 'underclass', the ghetto, etc.), relationalism indicates a theoretical position in the social sciences whereby the values, beliefs and behaviours of social actors ultimately depend upon their positions in *relation* to each other within the broader social structure (e.g. rich versus poor, centre versus periphery, etc.). This is where Ferrante's 'ethnographic imagination' irreversibly departs from that of Ortese: the description of how the 'culture of poverty' becomes internalized by her characters is framed in terms of the response and adaptation to unequal social relations (between classes or fractions of the same class, as happens in the *rione*) rather than as the result of an innate, hereditary condition. In all respects, Ferrante's narrative underscores the specific nature of the habitus as a relational, generative trait of the individual, that is, something that interacts with and can even

modify – at least in theory – its environment instead of passively reproducing it (Vandenberghe 1999). Unlike Ortese and Malaparte, Ferrante therefore still allows for some degree of agency in her crude characterization of the poor of Naples.

3.3 Structure and (female) agency

Another one of Ferrante's predecessors is Marotta, who arguably gave the most optimistic characterization of Naples' urban poor. In *L'oro di Napoli* ([1947] 1960), he describes their agency as 'an ability to get up again after every fall; a remote, hereditary, obstinate and intelligent endurance [...] This endurance, then, is Neapolitan gold' (Marotta [1947] 1960, 23). In his narrative, poverty is essentially a condition linked to pure chance, which reverses or favours individual destinies, leading to sudden misfortunes or – less frequently – unexpected fortunes. A person's merit, then, lies not so much in their efforts to climb the ladder of wealth, but in their ability to react to what is determined by chance; this is the domain in which the poor of Naples excel thanks to their ability to master the proverbial *arte di arrangiarsi*.

In this respect, the story of Marotta's family (as recounted in the novel) is exemplary. From the initial prosperity via the shock caused by the sudden death of his father (a lawyer) to the refusal to receive assistance from his middle-class relatives, the family is suddenly forced to confront misery, up to the point that he and his siblings feel mutual resentment as they are forced to share an insufficient amount of food: 'Do siblings really love each other in a family oppressed by misery? [...] When bread is cut and everyone is counting how many holes has his slice, at the table, I ask, do siblings really love each other?' (Marotta [1947] 1960, 54).

What sounds like a tragic dilemma is, in reality, described with a great deal of irony (at least narratively), which keeps together two supposedly irreconcilable feelings: mutual hatred and deep solidarity.[5] Oscillating between the two, Marotta and his family learn to appreciate the existential value of the smallest material goods – 'from the coffee bean to a drop of oil' ([1947] 1960, 59) – and, simultaneously, consider everything a commodity in the battle for survival. In retrospect, this appears to point towards the kind of conflation of spirituality and materiality that Pardo considered as the basis of the alternative frames of morality and action that dignify the very struggle for survival and self-development of the subjects of his study. Rather than a condemnation suffered passively, poverty would therefore enable alternative practices of social and political agency that simply escape the understanding of the well-off.

However, when it comes to the transformative power of these practices, Marotta's 'ethnographic imagination' stalls; his narrative presents poverty as just an inevitable fact of life and thus fails to envision the kind of radical

democratic progress described by Pardo. Ferrante, on the other hand, appears more attuned to the structural constraints of Naples' urban poor, whose lack of organization and representation has always been the most debated aspect of their political (im)potency.[6] In the 'Neapolitan Novels', the class struggle of the *rione* is uncoordinated and therefore doomed to fail: it is smashed by gendered violence, in the case of Lila; it derails towards the dead end of terrorism, in the case of Pasquale; and it is reduced to 'a petty battle to change my social class' (Ferrante 2015, 459), in the case of Elena. In particular, the largely traumatic development of Lila's and Elena's female subjectivities emphasizes a gendered aspect of poverty that is not only neglected by Marotta but also downplayed in several academic accounts romanticizing the urban poor and other subaltern groups as (male) social heroes (Roy 2002).

Indeed, both the romanticization and the stigmatization of Naples' urban poor heavily rely on gendered narratives, especially the description of women's sexual mores. When blaming the Allies for contaminating Naples with the logic of capitalism, Malaparte ([1949] 1952) states that 'the first to be infected were the women, who in every nation constitute the weakest bulwark against vice, and an open door to every form of evil' (45), making a case against the spread of prostitution. In a similar vein, Ortese ([1953] 2018) disparages the poor families living crammed together in shared spaces, with sheets instead of walls, where the children 'are normally present when their parents copulate, and they imitate it in games' (96–97), thus growing up 'already consumed by vices, by idleness, by the most unendurable poverty, ill in body and twisted in mind, with corrupt foolish smiles, sly and desolate at the same time' (95). Marotta, by contrast, endows his female characters with the ability to react to, or cope with, adverse circumstances. For example, when describing some teenage prostitutes who are recovering from their wounds, he conveys the familiar image of girls who play 'very childish games' in which 'they have fun with all their blood, as my sisters and any other girl of their age used to do' (Marotta [1947] 1960, 161). In this case, though, the author's gendered perspective seems to make him blind to the structural inequality between men and women that forced those girls into prostitution in the first place, placing his narrative at the opposite end of the stereotypical spectrum adopted by Malaparte and Ortese.[7]

Against this background, Ferrante's narrative stands out thanks to the remarkably nuanced representation of the intersectional impact of class and gender inequalities on the agency of her female characters. The various forms of gendered violence that Lila and Elena are repeatedly exposed to during their coming of age show how poverty can turn the development of female subjectivity into a different kind of pain, eventually obliging the young women to bend to the will of men in all domains of life. Nonetheless, Lila and Elena still manage to carve out some autonomous space in the interstices of the patriarchal structure of the *rione* – and subsequently wealthier,

supposedly more progressive contexts, in the case of Elena. Their experiences of domestic abuse and sexual violence, for instance, are not dissociated from trauma, as in Marotta, nor are they framed in terms of passive victimization, as in Ortese and Malaparte; rather, they are presented as structurally unequal social relationships in which the subaltern party actively negotiates her agency in the face of male domination (Mandolini 2016).[8]

4. Conclusion

The identities of social groups are based on the 'repetition of differences', as Deleuze (1968) would put it. The identity of the urban poor of Naples emerged from the infinite repetitions of their supposedly anti-modern character, which are still among the most relevant examples of Italy's internal orientalism. This article has argued that Ferrante's 'Neapolitan Novels' break this pattern by giving a relationalist tone to a literary theme that traditionally leans in the opposite direction (i.e. a substantialist ontology). Unlike many of her predecessors, Ferrante's characterization of the poor of Naples essentially focuses on their place in the exchange relations of the *rione* and – on a higher level – the city, both of which serve as a synecdoche of the broader structure of modern society as such. This feature of her 'ethnographic imagination', which the article has explored from a socio-anthropological perspective, permeates various dimensions of the 'Neapolitan Novels', from the internalization of the 'culture of poverty' to the construction of female subjectivity, countering the stigmatization (as well as the romanticization) of the urban poor of Naples that generally underscores their 'othering'.

Notes

1. On the politically controversial use of the concept of 'underclass', see also Wacquant (2022).
2. To some extent, this also emerges from the characterization of Elena's father: in central Naples, where he works as an employee, he appears surprisingly peaceful and welcoming to Elena, contrary to his harshness and aggressiveness at home in the *rione*.
3. 'But in Naples this kind of thing has been happening for a thousand years. Such was the experience of the Normans, the Angevins and the Aragonese, of Charles VIII of France, and of Garibaldi and Mussolini themselves. The people of Naples would have perished of hunger centuries ago if every so often they had not been lucky enough to be able to buy and resell all those, Italians and foreigners, who presumed to land at Naples as conquerors and overlords' (Malaparte [1949] 1952, 19).
4. 'The miserable conditions of this land are due to the incompatibility of two equally great forces – nature and reason – which are irreconcilable, no matter what the optimists say; and to the terrifying secret defense of the region –

ambiguous nature, with its songs, its sorrows, its dumb innocence – and not to the pitilessness of history' (Ortese [1953] 2018, 119).

5. Pretending to address his sister, Marotta writes: 'Dear Maria, I believe that our mutual love was huge when we were far from the kitchen table; we had to earn forgiveness for stealing the possibility to exist from each other; forgive me if I was born, dear sister; [. . .] This was our childhood: constant hate and reconciliation; I wish you dead, a shadow on the white dishes, an empty space where your spoon lied; but before and after, I love you so much!' (Marotta [1947] 1960, 54, author's translation).

6. Among other things, Antonio Gramsci drew inspiration from the events of the short-lived Neapolitan Republic – established by a Francophile elite in 1799 and overturned by the people supporting the Bourbon King – to elaborate the seminal concept of 'passive revolution' (Di Meo 2014).

7. Another example is Marotta's description of the custom of 'scarring', which consisted in wounding the face of a woman by whom the aggressor knew or suspected to have been betrayed, to such an extent as to leave an indelible scar. He accounts for this custom through some sort of cultural relativism, departing from the moralist perspective of Ortese and Malaparte. In fact, this leads him to downplay the objectively oppressive bases of a blatantly violent practice.

8. In this last regard, it has been argued that the emancipatory trajectory of Elena, who escaped patriarchy only in part and through individual success, testifies to Ferrante's ambivalence about the postmodern legacy of the feminist movement of the years in which the 'Neapolitan Novels' are set (Lucamante 2018). The same point could be made about the way in which she frames the overall fight for social justice: in her narrative, individualism seems to emerge as the only way out of poverty vis-à-vis the postmodern demise of class politics.

Disclosure Statement

Notes on contributors

Mario Trifuoggi is PhD candidate in Sociology at Goldsmiths, University of London. His thesis consists of an ethnographic study of informal urbanism in Naples, with a focus on the informal use of public space vis-à-vis the increasing touristification of the city centre.

Francesco Sielo is Research Fellow in Italian Literature at Università della Campania Luigi Vanvitelli. Currently he is coordinator of the Campania Landtelling H2020 funded project, on the literary representations of the Campania region in the twentieth century, and of E.C.O. - Campania Environmental Observatory, on the ecocritical representation of the environment in literature.

ORCID

Mario Trifuoggi http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4754-5756
Francesco Sielo http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7395-3369

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