

**RELATING TO ELENA: UNEXPRESSED AND UNRECOGNIZED
FEELING**

by

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We are all Treaty people.

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To the people who have offered me the art they love as a piece of themselves

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 2: FACETS OF RELATABILITY	5
CHAPTER 3: RELATING TO <i>THE STORY OF A NEW NAME</i>	20
Relationships	20
Recognition	26
Unfamiliarity	30
Vulnerability	32
Transformation.....	41
CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION	44
WORKS CITED	46

ABSTRACT

This thesis considers what it means to use the academically maligned concept of “relatability” as a critical reading tool. What does thinking of reading as relating allow me to see in texts? What kind of reading would I describe as relating? How does my personal and academic background inform these intense and moving connections with books I love? Drawing on Rita Felski’s *Hooked*, Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic,” and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *In Other Words*, I articulate the facets I think compose relatability: relating requires a more than intellectual relationship to text; it includes recognition; it includes distance or unfamiliarity (the imperfectness of the recognition is essential); it necessitates reading vulnerably, because to relate is to be vulnerable; and finally, relating to a text has the potential to produce transformation: the experience of being moved and thus changed. Following the mapping of these components, I will look at my experience of relating to Elena Ferrante’s *The Story of a New Name*, simultaneously reading how relatability works for characters within the text itself. From that novel, I reflect on how these facets of relatability I define influence my own reading and my relationship to feeling fully as an interpretive method.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

One of the major ideas in this thesis is that personal and intellectual relationships shape fundamentally how I understand, feel about, and analyse art. So, it would be strange and disingenuous to not acknowledge the many people who have purposefully or passively formed my ideas. Most obviously, the thorough, generous, insightful, and practical advice of Dr. Alice Brittan and Dr. Heather Jessup fashioned my writing and arguments into their current version. And alongside their influence, I see so clearly my friendships: Martina, Zorn, Lena, and Ryan. I include conversations with several of these people in the thesis itself, but they are far more deeply embedded than a brief mention—not only have they offered edits and discussion, but for years have been the people who recommended, discussed, and defined what I choose to read and watch and how I choose to think about art. These are the relationships that form the foundations and growth of how I read and how I relate. I love these people!

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Perhaps we can even redeem the language of the “relatable”— a word that is virtually guaranteed to trigger grimaces and pained expressions among any group of academics. To think of interpreting as relating is to foreground a thematics and poetics of attachment.

—Rita Felski, *Hooked*, p. 123

Lately, I have been unaccountably moved: by art, by ideas, by memories, by events, by conversations. Emotions are an overwhelming rush—I have gotten goosebumps from looking at a friend’s study flashcard, from hearing a Heritage Minute described to me, from reading YouTube comments. I almost cried when I read that Zadie Smith and her husband were friends for years before they dated, and when I remembered that the song “River” existed. “You were such an unemotional child,” a former teacher, now a friend, wrote to me in an email recently. We were talking about being moved by art, how we connected to it. She recounted her vivid, personal attachments with books and movies when she was young, the way she found art relentlessly relatable. She had trouble knowing if I read emotionally too when I chose to interact intellectually, analytically with art. But of course, how I connect to art has changed since I was thirteen, and along with my persistent goosebumps, I want books that excavate and produce intense feeling. So, I am especially interested, right now, in how I read, and how I have read before, and what it means to connect to art in the most unscholarly of terms when I have spent so many years contentedly distancing myself from such uncritical, embarrassing responses. And one of the ways I am compelled to describe these reading responses is as “relating,” as an experience of relatability. What does thinking of reading as relating allow me to see in texts? What kind of reading would I describe as relating? How does my personal and academic background inform these intense and moving connections with books I love?

Three theorists and writers helped frame these reflections for me, and they allow the knowledge that I am in relation to a text to give me information about both myself and what I'm reading¹. First, Rita Felski is one of the key theorists I turn to for understanding how emotional connections to literary texts matter. Following Felski's earlier work *The Limits of Critique*, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* continues to examine alternate kinds of academic and personal engagements with art, considering the many shades of attachment. *Hooked* asks many of the same questions I do, and consistently and thoughtfully shapes my arguments. The second major text that weaves its ways through my thesis is Jhumpa Lahiri's memoir *In Other Words*, which chronicles the writer's complete switch to the Italian language in her reading, writing, and thinking. Lahiri left a multi-award winning writing career as a novelist in English²; *In Other Words* is her first book in her third language, Italian. Her unexpected, passionate connection and commitment to the language articulates many of the key features of relatability. My third text is Audre Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic," which is about spreading pleasure and feeling through all parts of your life as a form of resistance to oppression. "Uses" is about feeling fully as a radical and transforming act. It offers versions of engagement with the world built upon relationships and emotion and is itself a text that encourages a mode of reading based on feeling and connection. "Uses" demonstrates and offers a reading

¹ My own reflections also emerge from and are built upon a current strain of scholarship that first allowed me to witness complex modes of scholarly writing outside of traditional structures and styles. Many scholars are focusing on addressing the ability of texts to move their readers and the valuable elements of that relationship. Scholars like Jennifer C. Nash, Christina Sharpe, and Saidiya Hartman are writing in ways that are vulnerable, making arguments that rely on alternative kinds of logic (personal tools, creative tools). This scholarship—grounded in readable, beautiful, and intimate writing—asks for a different kind of reading than more traditional academic writing, a reading where the reader allows themselves to be moved, inspired, touched.

² Importantly, Lahiri further has a complicated relationship with English because "[her] mother tongue, Bengali, is foreign in America" (19).

method that embodies its theoretical ideals, ideals that help me understand relatability as a powerful tool.

From these texts, I trace what I mean when I say I “relate” to a piece of art, and what I mean when I say that relating feels useful, meaningful, and interesting. Felski, Lorde, and Lahiri help articulate the facets I think compose relatability: relating requires a more than intellectual relationship to text; it includes recognition; it includes distance or unfamiliarity (the imperfectness of the recognition is essential); it necessitates reading vulnerably, because to relate is to be vulnerable; and finally, relating to a text has the potential to produce transformation: the experience of being moved and thus changed.

So first I will explore each of these stages in detail, drawing from my readings and research and the many conversations I have had about my ideas. And then I will look at my experience of relating to Elena Ferrante’s *The Story of a New Name*, simultaneously reading how relatability works for characters within the text itself. *The Story of a New Name* is the second of four novels (The Neapolitan Quartet) about the sixty-year friendship of Elena Greco (also called Lenù) and Lila Cerullo, beginning in a poor neighbourhood of 1950s Naples and following them throughout their lives. The novels begin with a frame narrative of Elena looking back at their relationship and planning to write about it; this second novel in the series takes place during Elena’s high school and university studies in late 50s into the early 60s. Lila, by contrast, had to drop out of school at the age of eleven, because her parents refused to pay the school tuition, and got married at the age of sixteen. *Story* itself is about the tensions between emotional and intellectual ways of understanding and prompts me to intense connection and generative reflection. This novel helps me engage with my own experiences of

relatability: the relationship I have with the book, the ways I see myself in it, how it asks me to be vulnerable.

CHAPTER 2: FACETS OF RELATABILITY

When you have a relationship with a text, with a piece of art, it is a collaboration, a co-creation³. With the help of Rita Felski, I understand these relationships as a kind of attachment. She reminds us that “[a]ttachment... is not just a matter of emotion. The point is not to shunt from the objective to the subjective but from a language of bifurcation (art versus society, text versus context) to one of relation. Attachments are not only psychological but involve many forms of joining, connecting, meeting” (Felski 5). The relations that shape my arguments spread and seep into each other—the texts have relationships with each other, and I have relationships with them, and my relationships with friends and colleagues shape my relationships with the texts, and questions about those texts merge into questions of my relationships with others. As I look through my books and essays to prepare to write, I find threads of the conversations they are already having with each other, including citations leading to books I’ve read: *The Critic as Amateur*, Felski, Barthes, Sontag. Sara Ahmed, whom I don’t directly cite but who has shaped my thinking, wriggles into the margins of my ideas even more explicitly by being cited in several of the texts I do use, and by citing Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic.” The connections that these texts already have with each other become part of the relationship I have with them. As Felski writes, “experiences of attunement are also indebted to the past words and work of others, to the laying down of a history of response” (Felski 52). That my texts are in community with each other and I with them means that relationships are already embedded in the very process of how I write about relatability. Reflecting on her experience of learning Italian, Jhumpa Lahiri explains,

³ We might think here about Roland Barthes *S/Z* and its exploration of the cocreation of the text through the reader, “the fictive dialogue between author and reader” (9) and the role of connotation and interpretation.

“[m]y writing is nothing but a reaction, a response to reading. In other words, a kind of dialogue. The two things are closely bound, interdependent” (37). Though I am thinking of relatability as primarily a reading experience, I want as much as possible to embody in my response what I think is compelling about relatability. Writing is also a relationship, formed through my connections with the text and dialogue with others.

But this web of relations between texts that we step into, that I step into as I write this thesis, includes the ways that we ourselves fit into this network⁴. Those attachments, carrying all their elaborate connections and connotations, don’t work in predictable ways either. As Felski writes,

Our consciously held beliefs about literary or cultural value do not line up perfectly with our attachments (those works that captivate and change us). Such attachments are not found but forged: neither purely self-created nor epiphenomena of social systems, they are cocomposed. And they are made and unmade over time. (53)

What I like about this comment is the element of change that is inherent in the relationship between a text and person. The web of connections I step into and that contributes to my attachments is always changing, pieced together by coincidence and taste and work.

“[W]e make works of art even as they make us” (65), writes Felski, and because of these changing but vivid connections, “attunement alerts us to the messy co-implication of text and reader” (77). As I move towards reading my chosen works in this

⁴ Framed in terms of amateurism, Derek Attridge imagines “an encounter between a subjectivity constituted by that cultural nexus and the equally complex cultural web that comprises the literary work. Neither of these is an organic, unchanging whole; on the contrary, it is their self-dividedness and internal tensions that make creative engagements possible” (38).

context, how then can I make an argument amongst these shifting, identity-shaping texts⁵? As Felski reminds us, and as I have found in conceptualizing this project, “it has often been held that attachment is an obstacle to interpretation—that a felt closeness to a work of art will hamper one’s ability to analyze it” (126), but she instead insists that those connections are what construct meaning: “Critique and interpretation are not opposed to attachment; they are built upon it” (127). And this leads me to a new, different way I exist in relation to my chosen texts: I am writing about them. This act, which I hope I can find to be aligned with the affects I explore, is its own kind of relation. I am no longer a reader, but also a writer conveying my experiences and ideas⁶. As I return to the texts I’m working with, I come to know the feel of the pages; with pencil, I mark lines and sections that will never make it into this thesis; stacks of the texts sit on my desk, physically insisting on their presence in my daily space. And these writings stay in my mind—I think about them as I eat breakfast, sit on the bus, and as I squeeze into fixed words my interpretations, my evolving understanding. Now, when I watch *Killing Eve* with my mother, I think about her acceptance and immersion in the story (“I can’t believe Villanelle would do that—so evil!”) in reference to Felski and attachment. And I watched *Killing Eve* to begin with because an article Felski references compellingly portrays it. Writing this thesis shaped by my desires, my tastes and preferences, which in turn have been shaped by so many others (friends, teachers), touches on the sense of community

⁵In “Beyond Professionalism,” Peter MacDonald offers an answer: “The creative critic who engages experientially with innovative forms of literary writing is obliged to rediscover the amateur within on each occasion. . . she allows herself to emerge from the experience with a transformed critical language attuned to, as well as expressive of, the new ways of writing, reading, thinking, and knowing the work opens up” (95).

⁶As Majumdar and Vadde remind me: “the object of study becoming the agent of study. . . pertains to the very spirit of critical writing as a creative practice with possible kinship to poetic, narrative, and dramatic utterances” (11).

that sits a little distance behind my ideas—the extension of the rationality that structures relatability.

Over the holidays, I spoke with my friend Martina about reading novels you relate to, about her perspective as a teacher and her students' desires to read works that reflect their experiences. We walked through the aisles of the rural grocery store I shopped at as a child and talked about the texts we ourselves were drawn to—our mutual love of Alice Munro, how Martina had also read the Neapolitan Quartet earlier that year. We talked about our fears of seeking out more of the same kinds of books, of the desire for a reflection of our lives, and if that meant a closing-in kind of reading, a kind of reading where we only read about the lives of intelligent white women. I think this is often the fear of relatability. And certainly, identification plays a role in relatability and may not be a strictly unhelpful impulse: Felski after all argues that “identification is not the opposite of critical or reflective thought: in the act of identifying, we may come to reassess or question our previous views” (83). However, I want to say that recognition and identification are only one part of the experience of relatability. Felski spends significant time on identification in relation to attachment, and her emphasis on the possibilities of such a connection perhaps reframes the sense of closing out other kinds of experience that I might otherwise associate with recognition. She does not deny the feelings involved in recognition, but reminds me that “acts of identifying, while they can be emotional, even passionate, are also *reflective*: they are informed by beliefs, ideals, and values. It is a matter not just of feeling but of thinking” (98). This experience of recognition as a

reflective process brings me to the experience of disconnection, of unfamiliarity in the act of relating⁷.

Part of how I started to think about unrecognition happened because of the community and relationships that have been so embedded in this project. In early June, I went to the Art Galley of Ontario (AGO), a place I love dearly and have gone many times. I have my own web of relations and attachments to that space, and this trip I went with my old friend Zorn who was in Toronto at the same time as me. We walked into a dark room that was supposed to simulate the inside of a volcano; we went into the infinity mirror exhibit; we climbed the stairs and listened to a Janet Cardiff recording and video; we admired the photography of Wolfgang Tillmans. We sat in the relocated café and tried to read (I, Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place*, he, *Notes from the Underground*). Instead, we talked. Zorn has long been a person to help me with my ideas. I expressed what I saw as the difference between recognition and relating. Recognition that is too immediate, too exact, leaves no room for the work of relating. I see that gap, that distance between the experience of familiarity and my feeling of connection, as the place where Felski's reflective identification exists. "When something is very relatable, you only have to relate a little," was Zorn's articulation, and I think that the work to create that connection is what is so potentially interesting. Relating contains both identification and disidentification. But, while Felski sees identification as including unfamiliarity—"variety and unpredictability are built into practices of identification—commonplace rather than exceptional" (118)—I think that this unpredictability has larger, complicated

⁷ Felski also reminds us that "identifying with a character can also be a matter of cathecting onto a plot, a situation, a mise-en-scene, a setting, a style" (87)—I don't want to forget these other layers of connection built into possible identification. They are particularly relevant to less intuitive moments of relatability where, say, a piece of analytical writing might feel relatable.

implications. Identifying is not merely unexpected, but rather relatability functions in part in those moments when relation is made unfamiliar and we are forced to reflect on it, work for it. And of course, Zorn and I were tangled in another web of relations: the immersion in the volcano, the disrupted perspective of the mirrors, the attunement to the ordinary sounds of walking in snow, the second person narration, and the unlikable yet relatable narrator all in the background of our discussion.

There can also be cases, of course, where one expects to connect to a text—ideas, characters, events that seem designed for you. After a presentation on part of this project, Dr. Asha Jeffers, my professor, pointed out a sense of disconnection that can occur when you read a text that “should” be about you (its events and characters align with your life, its author seems interested in ideas you have thought about) but doesn’t feel like it is. Felski talks about this deflation of expectations too, the “sense of surprise when an artwork does not provide the payoff we were hoping for. We do not relate to it as we had expected” (160). But in contrast to this sense of unfamiliarity, of unexpected disconnection, so might come a sense of unexpected, forbidden even, connection. Wayne Koestenbaum recounts how he, listening to Brahms, “developed an instant crush on that phrase, and smack in the crush’s central seam [he] understood that the infatuation was implausible, a crush [he] had no right to feel” (280–1)⁸. Sometimes the connection works as an irrational and passionate appreciation contrary to what one ought to feel in an engagement that is intended to be analytical. Connection to a piece of art does not work in predictable ways⁹. And there is in that unpredictability, a question of whether a deeply

⁸ I found Wayne Koestenbaum through Felski; she too talks about this essay but focuses on the pieces that create his affinity (7–8).

⁹ “Who has not been taken unawares by their reaction to a novel, a film, or a piece of music? We are enthralled by what we did not think we would care for; we are left cold by what we were eagerly

felt connection is the “right” way to respond: another place for the reflective element of Felski’s identification.

The unexpected familiarity or unfamiliarity of connection does not necessarily align with an analytical approach: “whether a viewer responds with tears or a smile of delight or turns away in indifference cannot be predicted by analyzing the painting, even though these responses define its impact for that viewer” (Felski 64)¹⁰. The tools we have been taught, that I have been taught, the theoretical and formal frameworks, nonetheless “struggle to account for the unforeseen” (47). Zadie Smith considers this question in her essay about listening to Joni Mitchell¹¹. Smith asks “How is it possible to hate something so completely and then suddenly love it so unreasonably? How does such a change occur?” (104)¹². This essay is about what Smith calls attunement, and she carefully traces her change in opinion. I sent this essay to many friends, I laughed reading it, it stuck with me in a way that was personal, I texted quotes from it to people¹³. My engagement with it seemed fitting. Unfamiliarity, in Smith’s articulation, brings the listener (the reader) to unexpected, unpredictable, surprising connections in the spaces between what you ought to identify with and what you do in the end. But unfamiliarity also causes us to read and see in unexpected ways. Felski touches on this strange tension within attachment: to her, “[g]limpsing aspects of oneself in fictional beings involves a volatile mix of the familiar

anticipating” (Felski 45). Elaine Scarry, too, considers similar unpredictability in being moved by beauty; for her, beauty is a site of possible error and reconsideration.

¹⁰ Derek Attridge articulates this same process: “in the moment of engagement with the words of the text this expertise takes second place to the singular, intimate, unpredictable response to the literary work” (38).

¹¹ I also found this Zadie Smith essay, “Some Notes on Attunement,” through *Hooked*. As with any research, pieces of writing lead me to other works; here is the web of relations again.

¹² Here I think of Scarry again; In *On Beauty and Being Just*, she also wonders about this.

¹³ Smith talking about encountering people whose knowledge bridges a huge range of topics and describing how she “feel[s] an anxiety that nudges beyond the envious into the existential. *How did she find the time?*” (emphasis original 107) is, in fact, deeply relatable.

and the different; to recognize is to know again but also to see afresh” (101). That freshness is what distinguishes recognition from relation: in that knowing again, there is the chance to know in new ways.

Lahiri shows us an example of knowing in new ways; her connection to Italian embodies this play between familiar and unfamiliar. When she first encounters the language “[i]t seems strangely familiar. I recognize something, in spite of the fact that I understand almost nothing...it seems like a language with which I have a relationship...I feel a connection and at the same time a detachment. A closeness and at the same time a distance” (Lahiri 15). This description of Lahiri’s experiences touches on so many parts of relating (connection, inexplicability, recognition). But it is the unfamiliarity within the connection that prompts such inexplicability, such possibility to be changed. This distance from an experience that nonetheless feels so intimate requires Lahiri to move closer. And her desire to learn Italian furthers this unfamiliarity even while making her more familiar with the language she desires: “I manage to understand and at the same time I don’t understand. I renounce expertise to challenge myself. I trade certainty for uncertainty” (Lahiri 37). The sense of distance and closeness makes us need to relate: relate as an active move that must be done more if we do not recognize ourselves fully. Unlike recognition, relating requires unfamiliarity.

A relationship with a text, a moment of recognition, and the experience of surprise all require different kinds of vulnerability. Felski, in beginning her exploration of attachment, starts out with that initial, genuine response: “What would it mean... to do justice to these responses rather than treating them as naive, rudimentary, or defective? To be less shamefaced about being shaken or stirred, absorbed or enchanted? To forge a

language of attachment as intellectually robust and refined as our rhetoric of detachment?” (xiv)¹⁴. Here, she moves us back towards a personal way of arguing and writing. Writing that gives up the security of traditional analysis by taking absorption or enchantment seriously is a step away from the safety and respect (clear skills, legible results) that traditional analysis offers¹⁵.

Eve Sedgwick describes how “[t]he vocabulary for articulating any reader’s reparative motive toward a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it’s no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives” (150). These affects in the context of certain kinds of study are embarrassing—to give up authority is to open yourself to embarrassment. Felski articulates a version of this embarrassment in terms of weak and strong values (essentially subjective versus “objective” quality (33)): “In the realm of weak values, that a book fails to resonate testifies to the book’s inadequacy; in the realm of strong values, it says something about my inadequacy” (34). She approaches it from a reader’s perspective, but Lahiri offers another version of vulnerable embarrassment, that of the writer: “I consider [*In Other Words*] an authentic book, because it’s sincere,

¹⁴ Though Felski argues for interpretation as a form of attachment, I think of Susan Sontag’s “Against Interpretation,” which also insists on paying attention to alternate kinds of artistic engagement. Her argument that “[w]hat is important now is to recover our sense. We must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more” (Sontag 14) is built on similar desires but moves away from the terminology of interpretation. Further, her insistence that “we need an erotics of art” (14) pushes towards pleasure and appreciation. And is an appealing tether to Lorde’s erotic.

¹⁵ Many scholars have written about how “traditional” academic structures and styles are built on and reinforce colonial and patriarchal systems of power and thought; respect, rigour, what is considered scholarship emerges from these systems of power. The complex social and political implications of writing in non-traditional ways are well-articulated and argued ideas and so not my focus in this thesis. But those arguments do act as important context for the risks that an academic writer takes in enacting that character of formal resistance. Jennifer C. Nash talks about the racial politics of writing beautifully—discussing critical memoir as a form, Nash describes how the “risk of being cast as unscholarly or unrigorous . . . has even more severe consequences for women of color scholars” (108). Felski connects alternate scholarship to anticapitalism (47), *Critic as Amateur* to gender (13), to name a few whose ideas I am building on in this paper.

honest. On the other hand I fear that it's a false book. I'm insecure about it, a little embarrassed" (223). This book is a vulnerable project for a few reasons: it is Lahiri's first book in Italian, it is her first work of nonfiction, it is about her own feelings and experiences. To work in unfamiliar areas and write meaningfully and personally leaves one open to different kinds of failure. Jennifer C. Nash, quoting Ruth Baher, talks about the possibility of embarrassment in her essay "Writing Black Beauty": "when an author has made herself or himself vulnerable, the stakes are higher: a boring self-revelation, one that fails to move the reader, is more than embarrassing; it is humiliating" (103). To offer one's writing up away from the protection of authority is a vulnerable act, a generous act. And a reader, too, can have authority: the authority of rigorous¹⁶ analysis, the authority of using widely accepted interpretive tools, the authority of coming to an accepted conclusion about a text¹⁷. As a reader, responding without authority includes its own possibilities for embarrassment. For me to be moved by what others think is a "boring self-revelation" might be humiliating to me as well. To relate to the "wrong" thing in the "wrong" way¹⁸ means I am dumb or have bad taste or am only just stumbling on a feeling or an idea that has been obvious to everyone from the start. Perhaps that is a reason why I am drawn to relatability in this moment: I finally feel assured enough (and educated enough) that I can admit to these experiences of vulnerability; I feel less like I

¹⁶ When I refer to rigour in this thesis, I mean rigour in that particular academic way that excludes all the complicated ways that something might be challenging, thorough, complex. I mean rigour as the benchmark of legibility within the above-mentioned systems of power that construct academia.

¹⁷In "Leavis, Richards, and the Duplicators" in *The Critic as Amateur*, Christopher Hilliard recounts standardized tests of taste where students read "good" literature beside "bad" as a test of reading skill (115). I wrote in the margin, "makes me anxious just reading about this test of taste."

¹⁸ And by the wrong thing and the wrong way I am again talking about the systems, structures, and norms that produce embarrassment in the first place.

am trying to catch up on all the insights I should have had about art I've never even heard of before.

Relational approaches (in Sedgwick's word "reparative") may open you up to the chance of embarrassment, but in casting traditional approaches and their protection aside there is also potential for new ways of understanding. Felski sees critical work as not contrary to but emerging from attachment, that interpretation "cannot be hived off or segregated from the other styles of engagement we've considered. What we choose to decipher, how we decipher it, and to what end—these decisions are driven by what we feel affinity for, what resonates" (128)¹⁹. Here, I think of my own project, designed specifically around texts that move me. I have often said in describing my thesis to curious relatives or casual acquaintances that this is essentially an excuse to write about texts I like. The gesture downplays my ideas, anticipating some imagined rebuff against such unrigorous work. But it is also true. I did decide to rearrange my work so that I could write about texts that I truly cared about. I always organize my writing at least a little that way—in a class, once I read something I like I know that's what I'll write about. But to admit and explicitly organize my thoughts in those terms is challenging. In the final year of my undergrad, I tried to write about books I cared about and write about that attachment. (I was doing an essay on Dionne Brand's *Theory*; it was the middle of online class and Covid; my relationship was deteriorating). I struggled. I couldn't make an argument that included me in it even though I had intended to. I couldn't allow myself to admit or consider the ways my feelings implicated me in the writing. I was simply

¹⁹ Mimi Winick in *The Critic as Amateur* analyses writer and critic Vernon Lee, describing how "the viewer, reader, or listener is necessarily acting the amateur, forgoing critical distance in favor of intimacy. Importantly, this intimacy is a means to accurate knowledge" (163).

caught in ideological loops about writing about a critique of the academy within the academy.

And this brings me back to Jhumpa Lahiri, because I also want to understand how that moment of authentic connection works its way into how we write, how I write. Lahiri, embracing a new language and writing for the first time in Italian in her diary, “know[s] that it’s the most genuine, most vulnerable part of [her]” (57) that does so. This unfootedness, this uncertainty is joyful though:

I feel free, light. I rediscover the reason that I write, the joy as well as the need. I find again the pleasure I’ve felt since I was a child: putting words in a notebook that no one will read. In Italian I write without style, in a primitive way. I’m always uncertain. My sole intention, along with a blind but sincere faith, is to be understood, and to understand myself. (57–8)

This connection to feeling offers meaningful information about oneself, and this knowledge connects us to joyful kinds of work and existence. Writing from a vulnerable place, a place without reliable tools, opens Lahiri to understanding, to reflection. Lahiri achieves feeling with reflection by setting aside her authority and confidence. She recounts the experience of writing, but it is aligned with the experience of relatability; I hope to bring the same productive uncertainty to my own writing (I am already embarrassed by revealing my desires, by the struggle to write in ways unfamiliar to me).

And so, what do all these facets of relatability come to? A possibility of change. Transformation stops relatability from closing in its reader with reflections of themselves. Change is what surprise and vulnerability might leave one open to. Here, the amateur comes up again, because for Derek Attridge, amateur reading and (as I would call it)

relating “involves an openness... a readiness to have habits and preconceptions challenged and a willingness to be changed by the experience” (39). For Felski, this willingness to be changed is receptivity. Crucially, though, “[b]eing receptive may require more thought and effort rather than less” (Felski 149), and receptivity “involves a translation of experience into an intellectual register, as well as an openness to what may seem alien or off-putting—a reflective receptivity, perhaps, that takes the form of clarifying what it means to be reoriented by a work of art” (146). The intellectual element is fundamental to thinking about this willingness to change, this openness to transformation. While feeling and vulnerability are agents of change, the transformation itself is formed through taking those feelings in productive directions. This seems to me one of the most appealing aspects of relatability: through intense feelings potentially comes “mutability that makes change possible— that allows us to be caught off guard, to revise or reverse an opinion” (Felski 48)²⁰. The transformation relatability might produce refuses to choose between a false binary of thinking and feeling.

But thinking about resistance in a specifically scholarly context is useful, partly because the scholarly is a mode I’m familiar with, and partly because academic writing is a particularly challenging place to think about being moved: “It is not only the casual mixing of art and life that jars with the protocols of scholarship but the belief that one can be transformed for the better by an aesthetic encounter” (Felski 62). But what is it about the protocols of scholarship that resist that transformation? Sedgewick’s paranoid thinker

²⁰ Similar to mutability, the language of growth appears connected with this language of change—a sense of something new emerging. For Lahiri, “Reading in another language implies a perpetual state of growth, of possibility” (Lahiri 43). For Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan in “It’s All Very Suggestive, but It Isn’t Scholarship,” the language of growth helps articulate how ideas themselves work: “Suggestive, not scholarship: as if the text were planting wayward seeds within its reader, which might sprout into beanstalks but only at the risk of her losing herself in the clouds” (67).

exemplifies these protocols: “vigilance of paranoia generates... a complex relation to temporality that burrows both back-ward and forward...paranoia requires that bad news be always already known” (130). This mode of thought—simultaneously moving towards results and having already found the answer, is inherently unable to accommodate transformation. Paranoia cannot account for the surprise of relatability, the unexpected changes. To understand these complex reading experiences and move towards the transformation they make possible, I cannot rely on paranoia.

I will conclude outlining my method with an example of criticism that enacts and considers alternate scholarship: *The Ferrante Letters*. The book is not just a valuable analysis of the Neapolitan novels which I will draw on again, but also an experiment in how scholarship might be collaborative and personal. In the book, Sarah Chihaya writes about mutable boundaries in the four novels, focusing on what she terms “unforming.” She ties unforming to the process of writing:

To read a book to its core, to get under its skin and let it get under yours, is to engage with it in a mutual process of transformation and sometimes-ecstatic contortion. This is, some might say, highly un-professional (whatever this profession is), definitely un-objective, possibly even un-ethical. But for me, to write a piece of living interpretation, to share in gutsy, real conversation with a piece of art, is always to invoke form as a verb, not just to submit to the noun of its existence—a forming that is process-oriented but not simply procedural—and to somehow animate that constant movement in words. (Chihaya et al. 146)

Chihaya reminds me of the mutual-ness of the relationship between text and reader.

Getting under the skin of a text and it getting under mine reminds me that this project is

about being a reader, but also that being a reader impacts a text. When I write about the feelings and ideas I have about the texts in this essay, which I have tried (and will continue to try) to treat loosely and unauthoritatively, I am offering an interpretation, shaping the text back. Transformation has the possibility to work both ways.

CHAPTER 3: RELATING TO *THE STORY OF A NEW NAME*

Relationships

So, how do I experience these facets of relating (relations, recognition, unfamiliarity, vulnerability, and transformation) in Elena Ferrante's *The Story of a New Name*? And how does the novel shape my thinking and offer an argument about relatability? I want to begin by understanding the role of relationships in relating further through "Uses of the Erotic" and how my own relationship with that text informs my reading. I first read "Uses of the Erotic" for a queer theory class in undergrad: it was the morning before that class, and I did not think I would have time to finish it (expecting something dense). Instead, I found myself captivated and transported. I return to "Uses" again and again, and each return reworks the relationship we have—new lines strike me, new parts of my life stand out. I have, in the time between readings, encountered other mentions or analysis of the essay (the cultural and literary context shaping my relation to it). I have had many conversations about it; I have recommended it to others; I have had a dream about Audre Lorde; I have had a moment of moving into sunlight in the chilled early morning on the front steps of my parents' house and her words have appeared in my mind and shaped that moment; I have felt trapped and resistant and called her ideas to assist me. And now, a new feature of my relationship to this text: the erotic that Lorde describes is defined by the connection that I feel is fundamental to relating. She writes:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding. (Lorde 56)

Of course, a text is not a person, but in relating, I am sharing deeply the pursuit of the text, that is, the act of sharing itself. In this case, the pursuit I share is the desire Lorde puts forward. I am both moved by the essay and want to take up its ideas. I desire to share my pursuits and that desire is itself a sharing of pursuits. When I relate to Lorde's words, I am encouraged by that act to live my life according to the erotic.

So, with Lorde's essay I have an ongoing, impactful relationship, and the essay itself speaks to the ways relationships shape what we do. The way Lorde's words help frame and articulate the power and potential of feeling deeply supports my reading of Ferrante's *The Story of a New Name*. I have read *Story* twice, and I had not reread it when I decided to use it for this project. I picked it because this novel is partly about Elena Greco going to university and her way of engaging with study and the methods of thought and argument she learns in the academy. My memory of these parts of the novel had expanded them to fill far more of the book than they actually do. In fact, Elena's time in university is a brief hundred pages or so. What expands to fill most of my memory after my recent re-reading are the weeks in Ischia, where Elena, Lila, and Nino²¹ go for the summer. And yet, despite not reading for it, this section is deeply useful to me in its grappling with the connections between intellect and emotion. And though I remembered relating to how Elena responds emotionally and intellectually to her attachment to Nino, reading it this time was surprisingly intense, nearly unbearable. On my first reading, Elena's experience of leaving home to attend university stayed with me, but on my second I was fixated on how she approached her dynamics with both Lila and Nino. My

²¹ Nino Sarratore is from the same poor neighbourhood as Elena and Lila. Elena has been in love with him since childhood; they are classmates while Lila has been unable to continue school. Over the summer, he and Lila, who is newly married, start an affair.

relationship with this text has changed, and that change has made me read differently and thus produced different arguments that centre intense interpersonal connection and intellectual engagement.

How I read this novel has changed because of the relationships I have with other people that shape my relationships to art. Yes, the ways we become attached to art, as Felski described, are indebted to social and scholarly influences (while also being unpredictable). But I want to distinguish the influence of *personal* relationships from social or scholarly impact because those connections are powerful in a distinct, detectable way. Who you are close to in a given moment changes present and future engagements with art; those intense personal ties that produce equally intense aesthetics ties. In *Story of New Name*, Lila, obsessed with Nino, uses attachment (in Felski's terms) to literature as an extension of her attachment to him. She tells Elena, "I want to read the same books as him, I want to understand the things he thinks, I want to learn not for the university but for him" (Ferrante 297). Lila's intellectual desires are consumed by Nino. I have certainly felt the way Lila has, and perhaps one of the most appealing parts of being consumed like that are the pieces of knowledge, the interests you get to pick up along the way. I would never have read Kurt Vonnegut and *Catch 22* and spent all my money at the second-hand bookstore in town during high school if I hadn't been infatuated with my older classmate and his jacket pockets full of books. Nor would I have gone to the library and checked out a stack of DVDs ranging from Billy Wilder to Ingmar Bergman over winter break in first year university if I hadn't been in love with my friend who lived downstairs in the same residence building and watched movies in the common room. My artistic interests and desires have been undeniably (though I might wish to deny it) shaped by a variety of

sexual and romantic interests (obsessions). Certainly, Lila's above sentiment, and Elena's similarly Nino-motivated intellectual studies (which I will turn to in a moment) are relatable. But is this form of attachment to texts (and people) helpful, fulfilling?

A guest letter in the *Ferrante Letters*²² addresses this, asking "Why is Nino there?" and answering that "he is a dialectically necessary stage Lenù²³ must pass through on her way from being Lila's minder to her own emancipation, intellectual, political, and otherwise" (Chihaya et al. 242). Elena's attachment to Nino, though often frustrating, also offers Elena the chance for intellectual growth. The passion of Lila and the productive insecurities of Elena speak to the ways intellectual and artistic attachments are so often about personal attachments. Felski is right when she points out that "when we are drawn to a piece of music or a painting, we cannot help wanting others to share our perception. It does not seem beautiful just to us but embodies a beauty that should be unmistakable to others" (50). There are a few parts of this: the desire to share in what we find compelling, the affront of that art not appealing to others. The stakes of both learning and sharing are far higher when those become about my own relationships with other people. I want more urgently to share the art I care about, and I cannot help but lose a little respect for those who do not see the qualities I do. My relationship with art may be shaped by my personal relationships, but art shapes those relationships back as well.

Though Felski reminds us that "[r]elations to artworks are not imitations of relations to persons; to treat them as such is to diminish rather than honor them" (31), in Elena and Lila's case, these ways of connecting are deeply entwined with each other.

²² *The Ferrante Letters* is a collection of blog posts in the form of letters and essays about Ferrante from four friends and scholars. The book also includes guest letters responding to and engaging with the arguments and ideas the four academics put forward.

²³ A nickname for Elena.

Elena's relationships with Lila and with Nino are the force and power behind her literary and educational relationships. *Story*, despite following the end of high school and most of Elena's time at university, feels like it is mostly about the summer in Ischia. And it is mostly about that summer because that experience for Elena influences her far more, both personally and intellectually, than most of the university classes she takes. It is her social connections that give *Story* meaning, that shape her and in turn produce the novel she writes at the end of the book, the novel we ourselves are reading about her and Lila's friendship²⁴. The relationships within the text are fundamental to the way characters understand literature and in turn offer me information about how I study literature. And all this discussion is diegetically contained within a book that I am examining my relationship with.

The dynamic between Elena, Lila, and Nino that shapes their summer in Ischia is built in part on intellectual connections. Elena wants her and Nino's intellectual connection to be more powerful than anything else—so that Lila is reduced to a “a mute witness,” and so “that between Nino and [Elena] there was a sort of exclusive relationship, in which it was hard to interfere” (Ferrante 205). The kind of relationship that Elena wants with Nino is one where her sexual desires are filtered through intellectual performance. But Elena's ability to show off her scholarly skills doesn't matter, because as we learn again and again, those intellectual connections can never be as important as the interpersonal ones. Yes, Elena does scholarly work motivated by her love of Nino, reading and studying throughout that summer so she can have these discussions with him, but her studying doesn't matter in the face of Lila and Nino's

²⁴ Remember, this novel exists in a frame narrative. Elena writes this story from her perspective decades later and it is expressly about their friendship.

mutual infatuation. Elena recounts how “Lila never addressed him directly, nor did Nino address her, they seemed embarrassed by one another” (209) but the connection they forge through Elena is far more powerful than Elena and Nino’s intellectual connection²⁵.

In the scene where the three of them sit on the beach and Nino and Lila talk buffered by Elena, I wrote beside those lines in the margins, “a tentative connection that is nonetheless more real.” Reading this scene, this whole section of *Story* where Nino and Lila begin to move towards each other in Ischia while Elena cannot herself move closer to Nino, I felt intensely Elena’s desperation for connection. The pages were at times viscerally painful to read, and I marked the places where the insecurities and desires Elena recounted in herself felt too familiar, too intense, too much about me (Elena “waiting fearfully” (213) to see if Nino will spend the day with her, Elena, “pleased” and “encouraged” (194) when Nino says he thinks the same thing as her). This moment, when Lila and Nino, despite their far more tangential relationship to one another, move towards each other, drew from me a sense of violent familiarity, a feeling from the past that the connections I urgently want are outside my grasp and no matter how much I study for them it is not enough. The sense of seeking closeness with someone more interested in the presence of someone else is certainly not a unique experience. Ferrante’s evocation of the highs and lows of whether Nino will go on a walk with Elena are familiar outside the conversations of art and intellect, but those discussions are what make Ferrante’s articulation of an infatuation and a love triangle unique. The crucial other party involved in the dynamic between the three is learning, knowledge, taste, which shapes attachment and desire. Like Elena, I am diligent when in love, and my diligence has mostly taken the

²⁵ So powerful that in falling in love with Nino, Lila risks the potentially fatal rage of her husband. After all, she is on this vacation to improve her health in order to finally get pregnant.

form of earnest though embarrassed study: the study of books, movies, ideas loved by someone whom I want to love me. When I relate to these moments with the three of them in Ischia, when I look at Elena (at myself) exasperatedly, compassionately, I also see the way parts of my interests and knowledge have been formed through similar kinds of study. Learning and reading and thinking and shaping my tastes for someone is exhilarating, painful but also generative, about the delightful intertwining of attachments.

Recognition

What is the difference between a relationship with a text and recognition of oneself in it? I find Felski's argument that recognition can be a reflective experience to be true: when I read *Story* again, I do not find recognition comforting, I often find it painful—an emotional response but also a self-reflective one. When I read Lenú's dramatic self-critique—"I, I thought, am not capable of loving anyone like that, not even Nino, all I know is how to get along with books" (Ferrante 22)—I identify (I too have feared that my intellectual capacities are greater than my emotional ones and that those types of connection must directly usurp each other). I recognize Lenú's self-evaluation, but I also see her sense of self-reflection as she looks back in the recounting and the extra distance that perspective gives her thought—allowing its exaggerated drama and real despair to hang in a balance. And in those emotions, I find my own recognition crystalized into something more complex through Elena's recounting and my absorption in her agonized indulgence of her own anxieties. I am given the chance to think, to bring what I believe about this novel (my ability to read this passage with its distance and nuance and narrative tricks), what I currently believe about myself, what I have believed about

myself (much as Elena looks back in writing this account), and use my analytical expertise to understand my emotional response.

Felski may focus mostly on the generative possibilities of identification, but identification has a more difficult life in *Story*. Felski's *Hooked*, a scholarly argument, and Ferrante's *Story*, a novel, are not the same kind of texts and I do not want to conflate them. But as I work my way through questions and distinctions between relation and recognition, I cannot ignore how that novel considers identification. In *Story*, Lila and Lenù are constant mirrors of each other, reflecting distorted possibilities:

Yes, it's Lila who makes writing difficult. My life forces me to imagine what hers would have been like if what happened to me happened to her, what use she would have made of my luck. And her life continuously appears in mine, in the words that I've uttered, in which there's often an echo of hers, in a particular gesture that is an adaptation of a gesture of hers, in my *less* which is such because of her *more*, in my *more* which is yielding to the force of her *less*. (Ferrante 337).

The two women and their thoughts and experiences reflect each other, imitate each other, haunt each other. The similarity here is restrictive, emotional mirroring but not reflective (in Felski's sense). Such imitation produces frustration and resentment as Elena struggles to write. And yet Elena "in the course of the years, produced another book, different, adult, [hers], and yet inseparable from [Lila's]" (455). Recognition and similarity between the two friends is also fundamental to Elena's development. Creatively and intellectually, they are entwined. When they change Lila's photo for the shoe shop²⁶

²⁶ Lila's wedding photo is going to be used to advertise the shoes she designed. She is furious and in preparing the photo to be displayed, deconstructs it by cutting strips of black paper to obscure sections of it and painting over parts with bright colours.

(another instance of artistic production) they “suspend[] time, [they] isolate[] space, there remain[s] only the play of glue, scissors, paper, paint: the play of shared creation” (122). The places where their mirroring troubles them is where they are put in competition because of class, or the constrictions and conflict they are put in by patriarchy (who can write, who can go to school, who can marry well). Similarity and identification are not themselves always troublesome.

The distortions of the friends seeping into each other extends into others, too. Bodies, not just in the case of Lila and Lenù, morph together in unsettling and consuming ways. Lenù “[feels] pressed, threatened by that image [of her mother’s body], and still fear[s] that it would suddenly impose itself on [hers]” (102); Lila and Pinuccia, another girl from the neighbourhood, appear to Elena to have “been consumed by the bodies of their husbands, fathers, brothers, whom they ultimately came to resemble” (102). When Elena has sex with Nino’s father, Donato, she fears that “maybe [they] really are made of the same clay, maybe [they] really are condemned, blameless, to the same identical mediocrity” (290). These squishy margins around people²⁷ are also a kind of dangerous mirroring, the dangers and fears of recognition that has no opportunity to be reflective, only imitative, within the competitive class and gender structures in which these characters exist. And yet for Elena, a failure of imitation is also a failure of class mobility. She has struggled to stay in school, and she has struggled to go to university; her success has not only determined if she will stay in poverty in the neighbourhood, but is based on how effectively she imitates and assimilates into increasingly upper-class educational environments she has been socially permitted because of her ability and

²⁷ An idea expanded on at length in Sarah Chihaya’s essay “Uniform” in *The Ferrante Letters*.

opportunity to conform her intellect within scholarly systems. When she attends university in Milan, she first works to remove any difference between herself and her elite classmates, but finds eventually that “[g]one was the pleasure of re-educating my voice, my gestures, my way of dressing and walking, as if I were competing for the prize of best disguise, the mask worn so well it was *almost* a face” (emphasis original 402). That *almost*, which might seem to solve the dangers of being uncritically consumed, becomes merely a chore, a barrier, a reminder. Again, mirroring is complicated: it is a tool for survival, a burden, at one time pleasurable.

And there is another layer of mirroring, of doubling, of possible recognition: the layering of Elena Ferrante and Elena Greco. In *The Ferrante Letters*, Sarah Chihaya remarks on how “the alignment of Elena F. with Elena G. at once flirts with identification and denies it. Both are authors who are named and not named, which we can and can’t identify (with)” (70). Diegetically and extra-diegetically, the novels play with removing the space for reflection and creating it, at once curating a sense of interiority and identification while creating layers of frame narrative that remind you of the artifice. Identification and connection are fundamental ideas within the plot and structure but also, fittingly, of the reading experience. Jill Richards, also writing in *The Ferrante Letters*, admits, “while reading, I imagine myself being them [Lina and Lenù], in every case. This is all somewhat embarrassing to admit. It is certainly not a very professional mode of reader response that I’m describing... When I teach novels, much of my energy is geared towards persuading students to avoid these moments of identification” (84). But here, in the face of Richards’ embarrassment (and here we return to embarrassment when we identify in these unscholarly, unauthoritative ways), I want to come back to Felski’s

reclamation of identification: “we can take on board what might seem like a counterintuitive claim: that the readings carried out by literary scholars— however erudite, ironic, skeptical, or critical— are not outside identification but premised upon it” (Felski 111). Recognition has the possibility of being reductive, but in the diegesis of *Story*, the problems with it are mostly based on larger social issues (class, gender). Recognition outside the events of the novel, though, has the possibility of being productive and working towards a more complex relating to a text that includes oneself. And the doubling authors, the tricky perspective play, the complex social commentary, pushes us towards generative recognition and misrecognition. Dynamics of recognition and identification work on several different textual and paratextual layers.

Unfamiliarity

But let’s move back to the role of unfamiliarity, the other side of recognition. In *Story*, Elena’s literary and personal relationships, while being built often on what I would describe as recognition, are also about unfamiliarity and disconnection. If her literary desires emerge from the relationships she has with Lila and Nino, she still feels a persistent disconnection—she describes her relationship to novels, saying “they presented intense lives, profound conversations, a phantom reality more appealing than my real life” (Ferrante 89). Elena’s connection to the literary is not necessarily one of familiarity—she was never supposed to get so far in school; reading is already something unfamiliar in her violent and uneducated neighbourhood—and is appealing for that very reason: it offers the possibility of literal escape from the neighbourhood as well. But when she connects to Lila she describes “[Lila’s] rage expand[ing] in my breast a force that was mine and not mine, filling me with the pleasure of losing myself” (19). That

sense of “mine and not mine” is at the center of the unfamiliarity that is interesting to me. When a feeling is yours and yet not yours what does it give to you? Perhaps that opportunity for reflection Felski sees in identification. Elena ultimately rejects a connection to Lila’s written experience by throwing the diaries into the river and only offering her version of Lila’s version of events²⁸. But Lila has always been a powerful writer—we have returned to that throughout— and her power in these journals is in part this power to change her rage into someone else’s, into Elena’s. This sense of hers and not hers that Elena experiences is an extension of the connection she and Lila have. Their relationship facilitates the literary impact of Lila’s diary, shaping Elena’s reactions and emotions to the writing. The effect of Lila’s alien emotion becoming Elena’s is why I see unfamiliarity as equally crucial to recognition; the work of making something unfamiliar your own is the work of relating.

And in *Story*, this misrecognition is important to Elena and Lila (Elena cannot see herself acting as Lila does, yet she sees Lila in herself) and that misrecognition is important to how we read, the play of layered narration that feels familiar, confessional but also includes the duplicitous layered narration²⁹. In describing the list of character names at the front of the text, Chihaya touches on this push and pull effect, that “[t]here’s something in Ferrante’s theatrical framing device³⁰ that evokes a Brechtian alienation from these characters, even as the body of the text itself—‘such drama!’—invites us to identify, or at least to try to identify, with Lila and Lenù as real people” (119). There is

²⁸ The novel begins with Lila giving Elena her journals to hide. Elena reads them and eventually throws them into the river.

²⁹ Remember, this novel is written as part of a far larger frame narrative: there is always old Elena retelling the experience of young Elena. In moments where we as readers are asked to move close to the characters there is also distance.

³⁰ Ferrante includes character lists with a brief explanation of relationships and events at the start of each of the four novels (I wish every book had this).

no simple mirroring between Lila and Elena and nor can there be between reader and character. When the novel doesn't allow simple reflection, the elements of misrecognition between the two women teach us about how they read, and the shifting identification of the reader in turn comments extra-textually on one's own reading. Misrecognition pushes Lenù toward reading in embodied ways just as my misrecognition pushes me to be reflective as a reader (I can't quite trust the book though I see myself in it). Both within and outside of the text, unfamiliarity makes recognition take on new roles.

Vulnerability

Rereading *Story* was often a painful experience. An intense, vital experience, but one where moments of relation were almost unendurable. Sitting at my small desk in my room, feet searching for a place to rest (for now draped over the side of desk, my chair at an angle), I called my friend Sasha. They know me well and they know Ferrante well and they know the soft parts of myself these novels poke at. I explained to them how painful it was to read the sections about Ischia, how I hoped to never be so anxiously, self-effacingly obsessed again. Because in my diligent study of the artistic tastes of others, there is also a shaping of myself according to those tastes. Elena's infuriating attachment to Nino—where she agonizingly doubts herself and wants only his validation of her intelligence, of her desirability—offers her the chance to learn; but this attachment to Nino's opinion of her is also excruciating and identity-undermining for her. I also have had a Nino. Arguably, I have had two or three Ninos, but what is so important about these taste-shaping and self-shaping obsessions, for me, is how they have been connected to my intellectual and artistic life, as they are for Elena. The diligent studies that have at times productively shaped my tastes and interests emerge from those unrequited desires

to be loved, desired, respected. Relating to Elena in these sections is reckoning with past ways I have felt and the slivers of others' tastes I have now incorporated in my own.

What stuck with me most from these sections about Elena's attachment to Nino, what made my body be covered by goosebumps (to return to my experience of being physically moved) every time I read the passages, was Elena's reflections, or lamentations, on her relationship to emotion and desire. Not only did they feel unhappily familiar, especially to a version of myself from only a few years ago, but also seemed directly connected to the ideas I was trying to understand through this very project. That is, the way analytic versus emotional response works in relation to vulnerability and emotion. Her anxious self-editing and overthinking when she interacts with Nino is at the heart of this tension between the safety of the analytic and the vulnerability of the personal.

Sasha and I talked about how Elena engages with vulnerability. Sasha pointed out to me Elena's persistent intellectualizing: she is safe (if anxious) in the intellectual world she seeks to share with Nino. Not only that, but though the intellectual world has been a place of struggle for her, it has been one of safety as well. She has been rewarded for her hard work in school, and it offers her the more literal safety of leaving the neighbourhood. But in the emotional world Lila is able to access, Elena flounders: "I wasn't capable of entrusting myself to true feelings. I didn't know how to be drawn beyond the limits. I didn't possess that emotional power that had driven Lila to do all she could to enjoy that day and that night. I stayed behind, waiting... she thought that to love [Nino] meant to try to have him, not to hope that he would want her" (Ferrante 289). In Lila's embrace of risk, including the potential violence of her husband and the emotional

devastation possible from being drawn beyond her limits, Lila does not approach her desire for Nino using Elena's strategy of protective study and preparation. Lila has no protection through study—she has not been able to continue school; she is living her life married to a Camorrist in the neighbourhood. Here, Elena and Lila's experience of gender also informs their reactions. Elena's more passive relationship to desire is aligned with gendered expectations for women³¹, while Lila's active love is in contempt of the feminine roles expected of her. Elena has always been better at adhering to expectations of her (she is the obedient friend while Lila insists on her goals), and in this case, those expectations, which are also connected to Elena's educational ambitions, are tangled together with her protective instincts. But in this adherence, Elena is cut off from certain kinds of emotional fulfilment. Turning to Lorde, we might think of this in terms of the erotic: Elena cannot feel fully (partly because she is invested in the traditionally academic ways of thinking that move her towards class acceptability) while Lila recklessly embraces the ways that “the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation” (54). Part of Lorde's argument is that access to the power of the erotic is a specifically gendered experience; women have access to but are denied this character of embodied engagement and pleasure. Elena's intellectualizing is tied to social, physical, and emotional safety—feeling fully is dangerous to both Lila and Elena (though there are different stakes), but Elena refuses the vulnerability of emotion and action.

When Elena struggles with how she responds to Nino and Lila's growing attraction to each other, she comes back to her relationship to feeling:

³¹ This part of the novel takes place at the very beginning of the 60s—those gendered expectations are shaped by era, place, and class.

Did I keep my feelings muted because I was frightened by the violence with which, in fact, in my innermost self, I wanted things, people, praise triumphs? Was I afraid that that violence, if I did not get what I wanted would explode in my chest, taking the path of the worst feelings... Why, then, even when I advanced, was I so quick to retreat? Why did I always have ready a gracious smile, a happy laugh, when things went badly? Why, sooner or later, did I always find plausible excuses for those who made me suffer? (236–7)

I feel these lines powerfully and intensely and they do not diminish with each reading. I read them to Sasha over the phone. I have read them quietly to myself repeatedly. They offer me continued catharsis. Here is Elena refusing or unable to act on her feelings. Lila and Nino have no such troubles. Lila is subject to the rules and dangers of the neighbourhood, while Nino is put at very little risk in this scenario. How Elena acts is not just driven by her own propensities but also by her class and gender, her desire to succeed in a more controlled, upper-class world.

But writing about the feelings and responses these sections evoke in me is different than looking at the complex dynamics between characters. When I relate, the text demands vulnerability from me. This passage makes me vulnerable, insists I must be; it takes over my body and stops me from ignoring how it touches me (physically, with gooseflesh). I recognize Elena's fears—that if the thing I felt were to escape outside of myself there would be a kind of violence, a risk. No risk or violence like the kind Elena or Lila are subject to, but a smaller risk, the risk that I might embarrass myself, might reveal what I truly wanted (the “things, people, praise, triumphs”) and be let down, that admitting even to myself how I feel would be too intense, an experience I must shy away

from, keep, in Elena's words, muted. And Elena's own frustrated fears about her failures of vulnerability feel familiar to this very experience of reading and writing too. I am frightened by asking myself to write why I am moved. I am embarrassed to align myself with her. Elena's approach to her attachment with Nino touches me uncomfortably and points to painful, dysfunctional impulses that I fear about myself—that I am incapable of wanting things, people, the right amount, neither violent nor muted. But my resonance with Elena is also a little distance away. A way I *have* in the past felt, acted. In the desire to crawl out of myself, to move away from connections between myself and Elena, I can see the distances between the ways I have felt, the ways I feel, how I have acted, how I might later.

For Elena, the relationship with her intellectual and personal life is a struggle. Not only with Nino, but as she progresses further into academic and upper class circles. She feels she will always lack something in conversations that move theory into life: “the training, perhaps, to feel the that questions of the world were deeply connected to me; the capacity to feel them as crucial and not purely as information to display at an exam, in view of a good grade; a mental confirmation that didn't reduce everything to my own individual battle, to the effort to be successful” (Ferrante 409). This is a complicated feeling, especially considered alongside her earlier despair at keeping her feelings ordered around Nino. Though her study for Nino is an emotionally and personally motivated one, she still approaches that intellectual work as outside of herself, a project that she can succeed at is she tries hard enough. Intellect is tool and an accomplishment rather than a deeply felt. Even the people from the neighbourhood feel that she is “impartial, without malicious feelings or passions, sterilized by study” (398); however,

this emotionless mode is confining and indicative of class. That ability to see ideas as about oneself is not part of how Elena has been trained by her life in the neighbourhood to think or speak. But despite academic training, she cannot easily enter these intellectual systems. Her relationship with rigorous forms of knowledge is complex: in the case with Nino, it is safer and more reliable than the personal emotional mode, and yet in that case it is still external to her, still a tool. But in the social encounter with the elite intellectual classes described above, Elena returns us to the question of authority: personal, stylistic authority³². Elena does not have the authority in academic or upper-class spaces to give up the rigid tools she has relentlessly succeeded with in the classroom, and yet in those spaces she learns that rigid tools are not enough for her to move with an unlearnable upper class ease. Proving herself in space where intellectual skill moves into social arenas is a different kind of negotiation based on inherited knowledge and confidence. Experiencing reading as a felt and personal experience and a form of vulnerability is a more complicated process for Elena because such a mode of intellectual engagement is contrary to her training and successes.

Giving up authority allows one to embrace other modes of reading and arguing, resisting “a certain picture: that the critic’s task is to brush past deceptive surfaces in order to excavate hidden truths” (Felski 131). Though Elena is in no position to engage with the personal during discussions around upper class dinner tables (she does not even have authority to give up in these spaces), Lila’s journals offer her this personal mode. When she reads them, the experience is intense: “I ended up learning by heart the pages I

³² Think for a minute of Lahiri, who not giving up academic but rather career security, recounts: “When I give up English, I give up my authority. I’m shaky rather than secure. I’m weak” (83). Lahiri, though, makes this choice well into her career; to give up authority as a well-respected author is an option that Elena, from her precarious position barely out of the neighbourhood, does not have.

liked, the ones that thrilled me, the ones that hypnotized me, the ones that humiliated me. Behind their naturalness was surely some artifice, but I couldn't discover what it was" (Ferrante 17–18). This encounter with Lila's diary twists together the struggles around intellect, literature, and emotion Elena has throughout the book. She reads this diary personally: she is thrilled, hypnotized, humiliated. These visceral, embodied verbs convey an equally visceral and embodied reading experience. She memorizes sections. There is no academic pressure to do so, only an innate desire to relentlessly return to Lila's words. And she is struck by the diary's naturalness, also. Lila's words have an innateness about them, naturalness we might also read as intimacy, authenticity, assurance. But simultaneously, she is convinced of their artifice, that they are in fact dishonest, that they have deceived her: if she was only clever enough she could know how. Artifice, though, also speaks to the craftsmanship that Lila employs. She is deeply skilled at both the emotional and technical modes of writing, further emphasizing the literary qualities of these journals. However, Elena wants to engage with the diaries in the mode of "excavating hidden truths"—even the language of uncovering is the same as Felski's excavation metaphor. But that analytic method doesn't work effectively on Lila's writing. Elena's hard-won intellectual tools from her education are not enough to meaningfully address the affective experience of the journals. Instead, Elena is compelled to approach it emotionally, a mode she has developed very few tools for. Her only means to resolve her distress, the feelings Lila has brought up, then, is by throwing the diaries into the river. She pushes away emotion, another protective act that reinforces her specific academic skill set. The desire as a reader to resist the emotional impact of a text,

to throw it into the river, is what I am trying to move away from; feeling the vulnerability of relating is too intense for Elena to embrace.

“Uses of the Erotic” offers a different mode of relating than *Story* both theoretically and in the way I relate to it. Reading Lorde offers an opportunity to curl more deeply in ways I want to be, to fit her words around me and be shaped by them while also feeling inspiration (relief?) that they are emancipatory ways of being I already have inside myself. I try to read Lorde as Elena is unable to read Lila. When I read the lines “[t]he erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 56), I feel these words as an embodied, vulnerable experience. And within that experience I feel both a sense of yes! Yes! I know that feeling, you have given a name to something I have experienced. I also feel the sense of clarity that Lorde has been able to capture something about this feeling that is out of my own reach. And she brings that feeling back to me ordered and articulated and ready to change me: changed in how I act, in how I feel, in how I think about and articulate pleasure, in how I consider feeling fully as a radical act. Lorde’s articulation contains new ways of being previously unavailable to me. Lorde’s arguments, though, also offer in their articulations of the importance of embodied feeling some of the tools and understandings unavailable to Elena. Vulnerability works on two layers: first, when I relate to “Uses” it is a different kind of relation than I have to Elena, one where I am explicitly invited to feel rather than witness the denial of vulnerable reading. And second, Lorde offers a reasoning for this embrace of emotion, a theoretical backing Elena does not have access to.

Lorde takes up the question of feeling deeply as a way of understanding—“we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information” (54). By throwing away the diaries, Elena is performing a turning away; she cannot consider an emotional engagement with the journals. Lorde’s erotic emerges from one’s “deepest and nonrational knowledge” (53). She approaches from the other direction from Elena, beginning with an embrace of feeling instead of a resistant obsession with it. When I read her, I find it reassuringly bringing me towards its aims, where when I read *Story*, I must resist Elena’s insecurity and intellectualism to allow myself to relate and be vulnerable. As she throws the diaries into the river, I must instead feel and reflect for both of us. Lorde’s erotic is an aspirational relating, one that makes me want to move towards it. Yet her theory of the erotic, like Elena’s intellectualizing, offers applications for what it means to read relationally. Lorde offers the erotic as “firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (53), an acknowledgement of its importance as a way of knowing. Feeling as a way of knowing is part of how relatability functions. I feel these lines; I know what it is like to feel intensely in ordinary acts. Elena’s struggle to read emotionally is a refusal to feel fully, an unexpressed or unrecognized feeling.

Vulnerability is one of the most important threads of feeling I want to pull from the process of relatability. If I’m thinking about intellectualizing in Elena’s case as sturdy control and certainty, vulnerability is uncertain. And I want to insist on the generative difficulty of reading with receptivity as a “thought-filled rather than thoughtless engagement” (Felski 155). My desire “to be taken over by the text and merge with it” (124) is intense and irrational and yet this “encounter defined by closeness and

vulnerability” (124) is what offers shape and meaning to much of how I read. When I am overwhelmed by recognition in the Ischia scenes in *Story*, it is a consuming experience. And yet, I am able to reflect, to move away a little. In Lorde’s view, I see the similarity but also the distance between the characters’ ideas and my actions, I want to be consumed by the text, I move towards the characters, but cautiously. In that balance of feeling and thinking there is the chance of self-reflection. What Elena denies herself in feeling when she reads Lila’s diaries is the type of engagement I want to embrace when reading *Story*.

Transformation

To understand the transformation reading experiences built on relatability might bring, I continue with Lorde. Her radical embrace of feeling is transformative; I want those modes of transformation to spread through my writing like her colouring in margarine:

we bought sealed plastic packets of white, uncolored margarine, with a tiny, intense pellet of yellow coloring perched like a topaz just inside the clear skin of the bag... we would pinch the little pellet to break it inside the bag, releasing the rich yellowness into the soft pale mass of margarine. Then taking it carefully between our fingers, we would knead it gently back and forth, over and over, until the color had spread throughout the whole pound bag of margarine, thoroughly coloring it. (Lorde 57)

This is how Lorde describes spreading eroticism from sex into one’s whole life. Lorde’s topaz pellet in the margarine is an act that in its distribution of feeling is simultaneously about transformation: the kneaded block and the spreading colour. And I include this passage in full here because to read it is for me a transforming experience. The image brings me along with it, holding me until I see the transformation Lorde advocates for. I

am touched by the crisp vision her description leaves in my mind and am visited by it beyond the pages of her essay. From the time I first read this metaphor, it has reshaped margarine, the colour yellow.

And Lorde reminds me too of how transformation may be entangled with joy. Lorde helps me insist on the joy and pleasure of change. And that change is required for joy and pleasure:

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea. (Lorde 56–57)

In this stretching open, Lorde, or whoever is embracing the erotic within themselves, is receptive (in Felski's language) to change. Transformation is in every movement of this instance of joy: the body opening in response to art, metaphorically stretching into the eroticism of everyday actions. Reading her words, I feel myself stretching, as if to music, with emotion and desire.

And this part of transformation, the forming of ideas, the forming of words, leads to the question of writing. How does transformation appear in writing? Lahiri, transformed by Italian, must transform her experience back: "Writing is my only way of absorbing and organizing life. Otherwise it would terrify me, it would upset me too much. What passes without being put into words, without being transformed ... has no meaning for me" (87). Not only is Lahiri the reader transformed but so is Lahiri the writer. Elena is also a writer, and requires writing to transform her. Having written about

her summer in Ischia and sex with Donato, Elena recounts: “I found that I was calmer, as if the shame had passed from me to the notebook” (Ferrante 433). Elena may struggle with the intensity of her feelings, but she has the possibility of transformation through language. She reforms herself and her experiences. Elena feels inadequate when she reads Lila’s notebooks, but when she transforms her own experiences into writing, the memories are changed and so is she.

CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSION

I have just a little more to say about transformation and relatability. First, I turn once again to Felski, who has appeared in almost every part of my argument. She describes:

Influence, in short, goes in both directions: in appropriating a work of art, we may also be disappropriated of parts of ourselves, altered by an encounter with unexpected possibilities. Such a change is a matter not just of the disorienting qualities of art—the shock of the unfamiliar—but also of the reorienting force of narratives, forms, ideas, values, and meanings. And for a work to (partially) remake who we are, we must also co-make it. (Felski 147)

Here is the whole experience encompassing my facets of relating: the mutual transformation in taking up a piece of art, the unexpected nature of such contact, the unfamiliarity and representation of what might be identifiable already, and the possibility of being remade through that connection. The quote also speaks to the relationship central to relating—the co-making of change. And this co-making that is crucial to the change is a vulnerable place to be in, one where we are exposed to reorienting forces. The change is voluntary and yet unpredictable.

And second, there is another complete version of relatability, less clearly parallel to my ideas than Felski. Lorde's erotic is a version of relation and transformation, not through specific, narrow contact with art but as a way of engaging more broadly: with ideas, experiences, but perhaps readings too. For Lorde

The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire. For having experienced the fullness

of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self respect we can require no less of ourselves. (Lorde 54)

Here, Lorde offers us a version of these same facets of relatability: our strongest feelings, the intensity and emotion of an experience, is measured, ordered, changed into a sense of self. Lorde's view of the erotic is built on relations: it is about the relationships between parts of ourselves, between the erotic and feeling and identity. And this process demands that our ways of living are transformed too, because the erotic shows the possibilities of embraced and reconfigured feeling. In connecting to Lorde's calls, in relating to them, I am also enacting the process she asks for, and I am trying to do so in my writing as well.

I want to end on generosity. It is in the background throughout: it might be generous to be vulnerable, it might be generous to transform. Relating to a piece of writing, allowing yourself to be changed by it, is a generous act "where generosity is not about giving but receiving, about allowing oneself to be reoriented by others" (Felski 149). In allowing myself to relate and to reflect on *Story* I want to be able to offer something of myself in return. I want my writing to be an extension of such reflection, my reception and reorientation through these texts: forming and being formed by these relationships.

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