



ITALIAN AND ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

# Natalia Ginzburg's Global Legacies

*Edited by*  
Stiliana Milkova Rousseva  
Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski



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# Neither Rich, Nor Poor, Neither Jewish, Nor Catholic: The Legacies of Natalia Ginzburg's Negations

*Saskia Elizabeth Ziolkowski*

## INTRODUCTION

The Sicilian author Nadia Terranova opens her novel *Farewell, Ghosts* (*Addio fantasmi*, 2018) with an epigraph from Natalia Ginzburg's essay "Childhood" ("Infanzia," 1948): "I always had the impression that we were a strange family, neither rich nor poor, much richer than the poor and much poorer than the rich, with a garden that was like a garden for the rich but with a dark toilet where fungi grew" (2020, p. 5).<sup>1</sup> The quote

<sup>1</sup>"Avevo sempre l'impressione che noi altri fossimo una strana famiglia di gente né ricca né povera, molto più ricchi dei poveri e molto più poveri dei ricchi, con un giardino che era una cosa da gente ricca, ma con un cesso buio dove ci crescevano i funghi" (Ginzburg, 2016b, p. 146). Trans. modified.

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emphasizes the strangeness of not belonging clearly to a certain socioeconomic class, neither rich nor poor, ideas reflected throughout Terranova's novel, which explores how a father's mysterious fate shapes his daughter, the narrator. Ginzburg's descriptions of not neatly fitting into society's categories inspire authors, such as Terranova, whose characters question their class, ethnic, regional, religious, familial, and other identities.

Terranova's quotation of Ginzburg highlights how Ginzburg inspires authors today and how contemporary authors' investigations of the contingencies of the self can shed light on Ginzburg's essays. This chapter first examines how Ginzburg employs her "né" (neither/nor) to forge spaces of potential freedom in her essays, many of which are contained in four important collections: *The Little Virtues* (*Le piccole virtù*, 1963), *Never Must You Ask Me* (*Mai devi domandarmi*, 1970), *Fantasy Life* (*Vita immaginaria*, 1974),<sup>2</sup> and *We Can't Know It* (*Non possiamo saperlo*, 2001). The chapter then considers how Ginzburg's rejections of categories resonate with the essays of Elena Ferrante, Jhumpa Lahiri (born in 1967), and Zadie Smith (born in 1975). Like Ginzburg, these authors use this evasive form to think through new models of being beyond conventional categories of class, gender, religion, nationality, race, and even language.

### REJECTING CATEGORIES AND AUTHORITY WITH NEITHER/NOR

Ginzburg again uses a number of "né" to describe her upbringing in a later essay that builds on the one Terranova cited. Originally called "Neither rich nor poor" ("Né ricchi né poveri") and then eventually named "Childhood" ("Infanzia," 1969), this essay even repeats the earlier one's title.<sup>3</sup> In it Ginzburg describes being home schooled:

Going to school, like going to church, was something other people did; poor people, maybe, or at any rate those who were "like everyone else", whereas we weren't like anyone at all. We neither went to church, nor, like some of my father's relatives, to synagogue: we were "nothing," my broth-

<sup>2</sup> *Fantasy Life* is Schwartz's translation (Ginzburg, 2003, p. 147); the title is also often translated as *Imaginary Life*. This collection has not been translated in its entirety into English.

<sup>3</sup> For the history of the essay's titles, see Scarpa (2016, pp. 348–9).

ers had told me; we were “mixed,” that is half Jewish and half Catholic, but in fact neither one thing nor the other: nothing. This being “nothing” in religion seem to me to pervade our whole way of life; we were neither really rich, nor really poor: excluded from both of these worlds, relegated to some neutral, amorphous, indefinable, nameless area. (1973, p. 58)<sup>4</sup>

Ginzburg describes how these differences had been a source of pride and humiliation when she was young. As she grew older, through her writing and changing relationship to her background, she found times that these mixtures offered positions of strength and freedom. While being “without name” can appear to be a lack, it also offers a space with fewer limitations.

In her essay “The Little Virtues” (“Le piccole virtù,” 1960), Ginzburg describes the educational advantage of being neither rich nor poor, which provides children with more opportunities not to focus on money, and therefore become generous adults whose values go beyond financial needs (like the poor) or concerns (like the rich).<sup>5</sup> Ginzburg’s classification of her class as “neither rich nor poor” carves out a different space than *borghese* or middle class would. Her use of “né” helps her to reject limiting forms of belonging or groups that offer pre-set behaviors. Ginzburg of course believed that there were times of clarity about belonging, such as the necessity for resistance under Fascism. She considered this period’s unambiguous stakes unusual: “The fact remains that those of us who are older can vividly recall a not-too-distant past when taking one side or the other and distinguishing justice from injustice was a matter of the utmost simplicity” (2003, pp. 143–4).<sup>6</sup> Ginzburg’s later anti-ideological openness

<sup>4</sup>“L’andare a scuola, come l’andare in chiesa, era una prerogativa degli altri; dei poveri, forse; di quelli comunque che erano ‘come tutti’ mentre noi eravamo forse come nessuno. Noi non andavamo né in chiesa, né come certi parenti di mio padre al tempio: noi eravamo ‘niente,’ m’avevano spiegato i miei fratelli; eravamo ‘misti,’ cioè mezzi ebrei e mezzi cattolici, ma in definitiva né l’una né l’altra cosa: niente. Questo nostro essere ‘niente’ come religione, mi sembrava investisse l’intero nostro modo di esistere: in fondo non eravamo né dei ricchi veri, né dei veri poveri: esclusi da ciascuno dei due mondi, relegati in una zona neutra, amorfa, indefinibile e senza nome” (Ginzburg, 2016b, p. 202). Trans. modified.

<sup>5</sup>“Ma se siamo così così, né ricchi né poveri, non è difficile lasciare che un ragazzo viva, nell’infanzia senza saper bene che cos’è il denaro e senza curarsene affatto” (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 103).

<sup>6</sup>“I più vecchi di noi hanno intanto ben chiara la memoria di un tempo non molto lontano in cui schierarsi da una parte o dall’altra e identificare nel mondo all’intorno il giusto e l’ingiusto era una cosa di una semplicità estrema” (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 185).

may have contributed to scholars' dislike of her work (Scarpa, 2016, p. 264).<sup>7</sup> In "Autobiography in the third person" ("Autobiografia in terza persona," 1990), Ginzburg again uses the rhetorical strategy of "né" to point out the limits of all political parties: "She is not a member of the Communist Party, nor is she a member of any party, since she feels a kind of impossibility of belonging to a party" (2001, p. 182).<sup>8</sup> The security of a party, a nation, a religion, or any fixed identity comes with pride and potential status, but also restrictions and the danger of dehumanizing others.

In addition to using negations to refuse categorization, Ginzburg also frequently repudiates authority. In "He and I" ("Lui e io," 1962) Ginzburg compares herself to her second husband Gabriele Baldini (left unnamed) by recounting a series of qualities she does not possess. She notes his superior linguistic abilities ("He speaks several languages well, I do not speak any well" [2016a, p. 45]),<sup>9</sup> his ability to orient himself spatially ("He has an excellent sense of direction, I have none at all" [2016a, p. 45]),<sup>10</sup> and his better understandings of theater, painting, and music: "He loves the theatre, painting, music, especially music. I do not understand music at all, painting doesn't mean much to me and I get bored at the theatre" (2016a, p. 46).<sup>11</sup> In "He and I," Ginzburg presents one space that she understands, poetry: "I love and understand one thing in the world and that is poetry" (2016a, p. 46).<sup>12</sup> Ginzburg describes the security of literature, in contrast to other actions or kinds of knowledge:

When I sit down to write, I feel supremely at ease, supremely sure of being in my own element; I use tools that are familiar and habitual and feel firm in my hands. If I do anything else, study a foreign language, say, or try to learn history or geography or stenography, if I try to speak in public or knit or travel, I'm in pain, constantly wondering how others manage those things;

<sup>7</sup> For a thorough consideration of Ginzburg's essay and ideology in terms of Italian intellectuals, see Rizzarelli (2004), pp. 47–63.

<sup>8</sup> "Non è iscritta al Partito comunista, né al nessun partito, sentendo una sorta d'impossibilità ad appartenere a un partito." Unless noted otherwise translations are the author's.

<sup>9</sup> "Lui sa parlare bene alcune lingue; io non ne parlo bene nessuna" (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 37).

<sup>10</sup> "Lui ha un grande senso dell'orientamento; io nessuno" (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 37).

<sup>11</sup> "Lui ama il teatro, la pittura e la musica: soprattutto la musica. Io non capisco niente di musica, m'importa molto poco della pittura e m'annoio a teatro" (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 37).

<sup>12</sup> "Amo e capisco una sola cosa al mondo, ed è la poesia" (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 37).

I always feel there must be some proper way to do them that others know and I don't. (2003, p. 41)<sup>13</sup>

Ginzburg grapples with societal expectations, which contribute to her to doubting herself, and characterizes literature as the one area in which she feels capable.

“He and I” has been read metaphorically as representing not just Ginzburg and her husband, but also the contrasts between all women and men, as well as between all Jews and Christians: “Human empathy and nonverbal communication between men and women are its principal concerns but, as critics have suggested, it might also be read as a meditation on Jewishness” (Stavans, 2005, p. 143). These interpretations connect Ginzburg’s characterization of being less capable with her identities and depict the contrasts between Ginzburg and her husband as representative of all people associated with their respective identities: a woman with Jewish heritage, a non-Jewish man.<sup>14</sup>

Ginzburg initially felt that her background would limit her ability to write:

I would not have been able to describe either (né) peasants or (né) princes; I knew neither (né) about the lives of the very rich, nor (né) about the lives of the very poor; what is more I was Jewish and, although my family was not at all observant, we were because of this in a specific condition and different from others: how could I imagine the lives of others from such a limited, specific, and unusual place? (1993, p. 8)<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> “Quando mi metto a scrivere, mi sento straordinariamente a mio agio e mi muovo in un elemento che mi par di conoscere straordinariamente bene: adopero degli strumenti che mi sono noti e familiari e li sento ben fermi nelle mie mani. Se faccio qualunque altra cosa, se studio una lingua straniera, se mi provo a imparare la storia o la geografia o la stenografia o se mi provo a parlare in pubblico o a lavorare a maglia o a viaggiare, soffro e mi chiedo di continuo come gli altri facciano queste stesse cose, mi pare sempre che ci debba essere un modo giusto di fare queste stesse cose che è noto agli altri e sconosciuto a me” (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 55).

<sup>14</sup> Evidence for these interpretations comes in part from Ginzburg’s discussion of her and her husband’s relationships to their distinct backgrounds (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 46).

<sup>15</sup> “non avrei mai potuto raccontare né di contadini, né di principi; non sapevo né la vita dei molto ricchi, né la vita dei molto poveri; e per di più ero ebrea e per quanto la mia famiglia non fosse per nulla osservante, noi eravamo però per questo in una condizione particolare e diversa dagli altri: come immaginare la vita degli altri da un angolo così ristretto, così particolare e inconsueto?”

Doubts about what she could represent and how readers might not relate to her descriptions are part of Ginzburg's development as a writer. Ginzburg narrates finding common ground in works that rejected clear categories, even when they described lives very different from her own: "I found the house described neither beautiful nor ugly, as I found my own neither beautiful nor ugly, and I found it very similar to mine, even though in our house there were neither stepmothers nor holy water fonts" (2001, p. 8).<sup>16</sup> Ginzburg's negations function differently than those in Herbert Marcuse's *Negations* (1968), in which he describes the possibility of freedom. Ginzburg is not developing a philosophical system or proposing a Hegelian unity of opposites. Her neither/nors are personal. In "The Personal Essay," Merve Emre examines Theodor Adorno's argument that the individual (personal) should not be the subject of an essay, since an ideological point of view should be the aim: "The private individual is the ideological apparatus that authorizes the genre's first-person address" (Emre, 2022, p. 32). Ginzburg's essays do not come from an easily categorizable ideological standpoint.

Several of Ginzburg's essays, including "He and I," have also been considered short stories and fit the original, Montaignean sense of "essay" as an "attempt." They not only explore neither/nor spaces, but do so in a form that is itself famously amorphous: "Yet if essayists must risk being told that what they are writing in is not a form at all, to be accounted as nothing when placed amid the recognized methodical discourses and literary genres, that contempt at least offers a sanctuary of neglect, even invisibility, in which many essayists have gladly taken refuge" (Karshan, 2020, p. 32). Ginzburg's honesty, searching, and hesitance are part of her striking writing in all genres, but essays, which she wrote throughout her career, provide a potential "sanctuary" in terms of their genre's status.

Ginzburg's formulation "neither nor" challenges generalizations that restrict complexity. In "Reasons for Pride" ("Ragioni d'orgoglio," 1975, originally published as "We are all different," "Siamo tutti diversi"), an essay on the women's movement, she remarks: "the phrase 'Being woman is beautiful' makes no sense. In actuality being a woman is neither beautiful nor ugly, or else it is both, the same as being a man. It is a mistake to find reasons for pride or humiliation in one's birth or origins, or in one's

<sup>16</sup> "La casa descritta la trovai né bella né brutta come trovavo né bella né brutta la mia, e la trovai molto rassomigliante alla mia, benché da noi non ci fossero né matrigne, né acquasantiere."

human condition” (2006, p. 1304).<sup>17</sup> For Ginzburg, the power of having choices is preferable to any limiting category, even a positive one. She rejects defining people based on one element of their identity, which relates to her ambiguous Jewish identity as well as to her not wanting to generalize about what being a woman means. One’s birth, origins, or human condition should never be a cause for shame and, therefore, she argues, not one for pride. For her, this category includes not only qualities one is born with, but also ones about which there is potentially some choice, such as parenthood: “I do not think being a mother, or a father, or not being one, is a reason for pride. Even less so are any of these human conditions a reason for humiliation” (2006, pp. 1304–1305).<sup>18</sup> While humiliation is the greatest concern here, pride is the related emotion that also needs to be avoided.

Ginzburg expresses discomfort when she feels an allegiance to someone because of a common identity. In “The Jews” (“Gli ebrei,” 1972), she mentions disliking when she connects with others based solely on their shared Jewish heritage: “This [feeling of affinity] is an aspect of my character that I find strange and that I don’t like at all because it goes against everything I have ever believed, because I don’t claim there exist affinities between Jews except some extremely superficial ones, because I think that people should go beyond the boundaries of their origins.”<sup>19</sup> She similarly resists the label “feminism,” despite sharing feminist movements’ values: “I do not love feminism. I support however everything that feminist movements ask for” (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 647).<sup>20</sup> Her essays’ many uses of “né” reveal Ginzburg’s frequent rejection of categories, sometimes despite her own feelings.

<sup>17</sup> “Le parole ‘donna è bello’ non hanno nessun senso. In verità essere una donna non è né bello né brutto, oppure è tutt’è due, lo stesso come essere un uomo. È sbagliato scoprire delle ragioni d’orgoglio, o delle ragioni d’avvilimento, nella propria nascita or origini, o nella propria condizione umana.”

<sup>18</sup> “Non credo che sia una ragione d’orgoglio né l’essere madre, né essere padre, né il non esserlo. Meno ancora credo che una di queste condizioni umane sia una ragione d’umiliazione.”

<sup>19</sup> Milkova Rousseva’s translation from Scarpa’s chapter included in this volume. “Questo è un aspetto della mia natura che trovo strano e che non mi piace affatto, perché è in aperto contrasto con tutto quello che ho sempre pensato nel corso della mia vita, perché ritengo che non esistano fra gli ebrei delle affinità se non estremamente superficiali, perché penso che gli uomini debbano oltrepassare i confini delle loro origini” (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 643).

<sup>20</sup> “Non amo il femminismo. Condivido però tutto quello che chiedono i movimenti femminili.”

Ginzburg's negations open up spaces of contradiction. These confusions or doubts can appear to be a sign of sadness in Ginzburg's writing; the entry on Ginzburg in Routledge's *Encyclopedia of the Essay* emphasizes Ginzburg's melancholy: "Many of Ginzburg's essays are melancholic; there is a constant reiteration of diminished possibilities, and a profound, but frequently implicit, sense of loss" (Lazar, 1997, p. 343). While the powerful essay on Leone Ginzburg's death, "Winter in the Abruzzi" ("Inverno in Abruzzo," 1962), which incorporates the loss of the optimism she had before he died, is profoundly melancholic, many of her other essays describe a lack of certain possibilities in a way that is not necessarily sad, but is certainly never triumphant. Ginzburg expresses doubts and humility about almost anything that could be defined a success or a source of pride.

THE RESONANCES OF GINZBURG'S NEITHER/NORS:  
THE ESSAYS OF ELENA FERRANTE, JHUMPA LAHIRI,  
AND ZADIE SMITH

Ginzburg's non-ideological grappling with neither/nor spaces are of increasing interest in the twenty-first century. Appearing between Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963), Ginzburg's *The Little Virtues* (1962) was chosen as one of the significant examples of essay writing in the chronology provided by *The Cambridge Companion to the Essay* (Wittman & Kindley, 2022, xxxi). Recent attempts to resituate Ginzburg for contemporary readers incorporate a wide range of authors, including Jhumpa Lahiri, Elena Ferrante, and Zadie Smith. Lahiri chose Ginzburg's "My Husband" ("Mio marito," 1941) for her short story anthology and participated in events promoting Ginzburg's translations into English. Lahiri places her own Italian work, *In Other Words* (*In altre parole*, 2015), in a genealogy with Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon*: "I consider it a sort of linguistic autobiography, a self-portrait. It seems fitting to cite Natalia Ginzburg, who, in the foreword to *Lessico familiare* (*Family Sayings*), writes, 'I have invented nothing'" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 213).<sup>21</sup> Connections between Ginzburg and Ferrante have been established by both scholars, notably

<sup>21</sup> "Lo ritengo una sort di autobiografia linguistica, un autoritratto. Mi pare giusto citare le parole di Natalia Ginzburg che, nell'avvertenza di *Lessico familiare*, diceva, 'Non ho inventato niente'" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 212).

Silvia Caserta (2019) and Stiliana Milkova (2021, pp. 29, 60, 63), and journalists in *The New York Times* (Momigliano, 2019), *The Guardian* (Feigel, 2019), and *The New Yorker* (Acocella, 2019). Ferrante includes Natalia Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon*, as she does Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpretations of Maladies* and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, in her list of favorite books by female authors (Cain, 2020). Smith provided a blurb for *Happiness, As Such* (Caro Michele, 1973) and is grouped with Rachel Cusk, Maggie Nelson, Sally Rooney, and Colm Tóibín as one of Ginzburg's admirers (Peirson-Hagger, 2022, p. 42), in part to draw the attention of English-readers to Ginzburg's work.

The connections between these four authors go beyond associations made for marketing purposes. While the list of Italian and transnational authors who explore neither/nor spaces could be greatly expanded, Ferrante, Lahiri, and Smith all investigate the self, literature, and identities in essay form, as well as in their renowned literature. The essays of Ferrante (*Incidental Inventions, L'invenzione occasionale*, 2019b), Lahiri (*Translating Myself and Others*, 2022), and Smith (*Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, 2009a and *Feel Free: Essays*, 2018) explore the limits of labels, the power of imperfection, and literature's relationship to these topics, in ways that productively relate to Ginzburg's modest neither/nor.

The similarities between Ginzburg, Ferrante, Lahiri, and Smith show the importance of comparative and transnational approaches, especially for these authors who develop alternative spaces and embrace change. Lahiri discusses the long history of Italian's diversity and of people who, like her, contribute to Italian's variety: "This history of the Italian language, and Latin before that, has always had a plural and migratory identity" (2022, p. 135). In 2023 Lahiri nominated Igiaba Scego's *Cassandra a Mogadiscio* for the Strega Prize, arguing that Scego is part of an important lineage of authors who enrich Italian because of their "hybrid condition" ("condizione ibrida") (2023). The two earlier hybrid authors Lahiri cites, Primo Levi and Italo Svevo, share with Ginzburg having Jewish origins and being foundational authors for twentieth-century Italy. Ginzburg's neither/nors reveal both a significant Italian literary tradition of grappling with societal expectations and identities as well as the relevance of these works for authors today.

In distinct ways Ginzburg, Ferrante, Lahiri, and Smith have moved between Anglophone and Italoophone spaces, revealing the importance of centering Italy (as other places), not just the United States and England, in transnational and global discourses. These Italian and English linguistic



worlds are not separate but in constant negotiation. Ginzburg temporarily moved to England, visited her family in the United States, and translated from English to Italian. Smith has written essays about her visits to Italy and lived there in 2006–2007 (Smith, 2013). Most obviously, Lahiri moved to Rome in 2012 and the city remains one of her homes, writes in Italian, and translates from Italian to English. Experiences of difference and belonging in Italy have contributed to these authors' ideas of connection and authority. Lahiri and Smith both describe encountering prejudiced reactions to their appearance in Italy. Lahiri shares frustration that her husband's Italian is mistakenly perceived as better because he "looks as if he could be Italian" (2016, p. 135).<sup>22</sup>

Ferrante, a pseudonym that prevents discussion of her biography in the same way as the other authors, published essays for *The Guardian* in Ann Goldstein's translation. She wrote them in Italian, imagining an English audience. Beyond reflecting just translation decisions, some of the differences between the original version (in Italian) and one first published (in English) indicate the flexible nature of the essay form.<sup>23</sup> Related to Ginzburg's two "Infanzia" essays, separated by over twenty years, essays can represent a continuing process. Lahiri's shift to Italian has been accompanied by numerous essays that reflect on her development. The thematic connections between these authors are paralleled by their approaches to the essay as an open form.

Ginzburg resisted categories like "women authors," but many of the authors associated with Ginzburg are women and a number of their essays, like Ginzburg's, also explore being women. Ginzburg's constant iteration of not possessing certain qualities can be read in a female lineage of lacking traditional authority. Jen Wienstein argues that Ginzburg's style recalls other women's in its insecurity: "The hesitant, insecure, and apologetic tone in Natalia Ginzburg's voice is not unfamiliar; it is, in fact, reminiscent of other literary voices heard in different places and at different times—and almost exclusively women's voices" (2000, p. 182). Ginzburg notes in her essay "My Vocation" ("Il mio mestiere," 1949) that she is a poor writer of essays and expresses doubts about writing for a deadline: "If I try

<sup>22</sup> "dall'aspetto potrebbe sembrare un italiano" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 134). For a more thorough discussion of this in terms of Lahiri, see Walkowitz (2020) and Milkova Rousseva, 2023.

<sup>23</sup> See for instance the presence (Ferrante, 2019b, p. 22) and absence (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 18) of Virginia Woolf, whose connections as essay writer with these four authors would be a separate chapter.

writing a critical essay or newspaper article on request, it goes fairly badly; I have to labor to find the words somewhere outside myself” (Ginzburg, 2003, p. 41).<sup>24</sup> In the essays first published in *The Guardian* over the course of a year and then collectively in *Incidental Inventions*, Ferrante similarly describes her anxiety about writing for a deadline, fearful that she will not accomplish what she has been asked to do (Ferrante, 2019a, 5).

Ferrante and Smith both frame a number of their essays by making clear what they are not, how they are without authority. Smith introduces her essay collection *Feel Free* by discussing her lack of expertise: “I think the anxiety comes from knowing I have no real qualifications to write as I do. Not a philosopher or a sociologist, not a real professor of literature or film, not a political scientist, professional music critic or trained journalist. I’m employed in an MFA program, but have no MFA myself, and no PHD” (2018, p. 1). Several of Ferrante’s essays start by stating what the author is not capable of doing. The first line of her essay “Interviews” is: “I am not very good at speaking, in public or private” (Ferrante, 2019b, p. 79).<sup>25</sup> The first line of “Fears” is “I’m not brave” (Ferrante, 2019b, p. 15).<sup>26</sup> This fear or self-doubt is frequently characterized as female: “A widespread female intelligence that produces writing of a high literary quality has become manifest. But the cliché dies hard: we are emotional; we please. Men make great literature and teach fearlessly, through their words and deeds, how all the evil in the world should yield to good” (Ferrante, 2019b, p. 92).<sup>27</sup> Ferrante indicates that male writing is viewed as fearless and female accommodating. While stated in these terms they represent an overgeneralization, Ginzburg, Ferrante, and Smith often question themselves and express a willingness to change, in contrast to authors who express secure or fixed views.

<sup>24</sup> “Se mi provo a scrivere un saggio di critica o un articolo per un giornale a comando, va abbastanza male. Quello che allora scrivo lo devo cercare faticosamente come fuori di me” (Ginzburg, 2015, p. 55).

<sup>25</sup> “Non me la cavo bene col discorso orale, non solo in pubblico, ma anche in privato” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 75).

<sup>26</sup> “Non sono coraggiosa” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 11).

<sup>27</sup> “È diventata evidente una diffusa intelligenza femminile che produce scrittura di grande forza letteraria. Ma il luogo comune è duro a morire: le donne emozionano, le donne diletano; gli uomini invece insegnano dalle cattedre che davvero contano come, con parole virili e virilissimi fatti, si plasma e si riplasma il mondo” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 88).

Ginzburg's essay "Women and Men" ("Donne e uomini," 1977) examines Adrienne Rich's statement about the need to explore what traditional thought rejects:

The words 'think along the lines that traditional thinking denies' touches me profoundly. I grew up in the patriarchy, I believe that I am drenched in patriarchy from my head to toes. I well understand the absolute necessity to think today 'along the lines that traditional thought denies' but I find it difficult. The masculine and feminine images that I have in my mind are, and I know it, distorted, old, and limited, but I am not able to destroy them. (2001, p. 90)<sup>28</sup>

Ginzburg here aims to create an image that society has refused or suppressed. She admits how difficult it is to consider the unexpected or not accepted; the neither/nor takes a great deal of work. Ginzburg describes her struggle with Rich's ideas and concludes with a reflection on how not just women, but also men, need to reimagine themselves. This essay represents part of her continual contemplation of what it means to be a woman, in society and as a writer.

Ginzburg, Lahiri, and Smith all discuss the relationship between authorial identities and literature. These authors repeatedly propose literature as a space where they, and readers, can attempt to escape categories, especially as women and as ones who find themselves "othered" in additional ways (Jewish, Indian-American, Black). Stiliana Milkova has shown the significance of art and literature for Ferrante's characters, as women, to find spaces outside of male structures: "Art making for Ferrante's female subjects is tantamount to identity formation and self-actualization outside male constructs and artistic forms" (2021, p. 106). Ferrante has described the struggle to develop her style as a woman writer:

At the time I also considered myself a lowly, abject woman. I was afraid, as I said, that it was precisely my female nature that kept me from bringing the pen as close as possible to the pain I wanted to express. For a woman who has something to say, does it really take a miracle—I said to myself—to

<sup>28</sup> "Le parole 'pensare secondo linee che il pensiero tradizionale nega' mi toccano nel profondo. Sono cresciuta nel patriarcato: credo di essere imbevuta di patriarcato dalla testa ai piedi. Capisco bene la necessità assoluta di pensare oggi 'secondo linee che il pensiero tradizionale nega' ma lo trovo ben difficile. Le immagini virili e femminili che io ho in testa, sono, e lo so, distorte, antiche e tarate; ma non riesco a distruggerle."

dissolve the margins within which nature has enclosed her and show herself in her own words to the world? (2022, pp. 26–27)<sup>29</sup>

While many of Ferrante’s analyses investigate similar spaces to Ginzburg’s, she more clearly builds on a feminist lineage. Ferrante proposes reconfiguring the questions about gender roles: “It’s not our relationship with the masculine that is primary today but the much more complex relationship with the masculine feminine or the feminine masculine” (Ferrante, 2016, p. 225).<sup>30</sup> Ferrante has prompted a great deal of critical engagement that foregrounds what “traditional thought” negates.<sup>31</sup>

Before having children, Ginzburg had wanted to write as a man: “Irony and malice struck me as critical weapons to hold on to; I could use them to write like a man; I had a horror that my writing might reveal that I was a woman” (2003, p. 49).<sup>32</sup> Ginzburg later challenges feeling pride, shame, or regret about any of one’s identities, including sex, religious, ethnicity, sexuality, national, or other: “Being women, being Jewish, being or becoming gay, is like being born in one country or another” (2001, p. 46).<sup>33</sup> Ginzburg highlights the accidental nature of these qualities (gender, religion, sexuality) by discussing national identity, which appears to offer the clearest example of the chance involved in identity.

Ferrante also challenges pride or identification based on national identity: “National characteristics are simplifications that should be contested”

<sup>29</sup> “All’epoca mi consideravo anch’io una donna abietta e vile. Temevo, come ho detto, che fosse proprio la mia natura femminile a impedirmi di accostare il più possibile la penna alla pena che volevo esprimere. Ci vuole davvero un miracolo—mi dicevo—perché una donna che ha cose da raccontare dissolva i margini dentro cui pare chiusa per sua natura e si mostri con la sua scrittura al mondo” (Ferrante, 2021, p. 25).

<sup>30</sup> “Non è il nostro rapporto col maschile che oggi è preminente, ma quello ben più complesso col maschil-femminile o col femminil-maschile” (Ferrante, 2015, p. 217).

<sup>31</sup> For authors exploring Ferrante’s feminist lineages see for instance Lucamante (2018), Milkova (2021), Granacki (2023).

<sup>32</sup> “L’ironia e la malvagità mi parevano armi molto importanti nelle mie mani; mi pareva che mi servissero a scrivere come un uomo, perché allora desideravo terribilmente di scrivere come un uomo, avevo orrore che si capisse che ero una donna dalle cose che scrivevo” (Ginzburg, p. 82).

<sup>33</sup> “Essere donne, essere ebrei, essere o diventare omosessuali, è come essere nati in un paese o in un altro.”

(Ferrante, 2019b, p. 23).<sup>34</sup> In her essay “Linguistic Nationality” (“Nazionalità linguistica,” Ferrante, 2019b), Ferrante focuses on the language one writes in rather than the place one is born, a differentiation that easily accommodates Lahiri’s Italian writing: “I prefer linguistic nationality as a part of departure for dialogue, an effort to cross over the limit, to look beyond the border—beyond all borders, especially those of gender” (Ferrante, 2019b, p. 24).<sup>35</sup> Like Ginzburg, Ferrante associates the crossing of national borders with the crossing of others, including—significantly—gender.

Lahiri’s choice of Italian was in part a rejection of identity labels and the restriction of origins: “Some people ask me, *Why Italian instead of an Indian language, a closer language, more like you?* The short answer remains: I write in Italian to feel free” (Lahiri, 2022, pp. 10–11). Identity becomes vaguer in Lahiri’s (2021) Italian fiction: *Whereabouts* (*Dove mi trovo*, Lahiri, 2018) provides many fewer details about the protagonist’s background than Lahiri’s fiction in English had.<sup>36</sup> Smith’s essay “Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Literature” (Smith, 2019) characterizes her attempts to imagine being another person, from a different country or other background, as related to her development as a writer as well: “As I saw it, even my strongest feelings and convictions might easily be otherwise, had I been the child of the next family down the hall, or the child of another century, another country, another God” (Smith, 2019). Considering the vagaries of identity is a key part of these authors’ essays and literary styles.

Lahiri takes this imagining a step further with her choice to write in Italian: “We can change our city, citizenship, body, face, gender, family, religion. Through grafting, we can refute our origins, today more than ever” (Lahiri, 2022, p. 21). Lahiri had found the idea of grafting (graft, “innesto”) in Ferrante’s *The Lost Daughter* (*La figlia oscura*, 2006) (Lahiri, 2022, p. 19). Lahiri desires change: “In my case, as a writer and as a person, I seek to grow a new variety of myself” (Lahiri, 2022, p. 22). Smith’s description of the relationship between writing and the self contextualizes

<sup>34</sup> “I caratteri nazionali mi sembrano semplificazioni che vanno combattute” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> “Preferisco la nazionalità linguistica in quanto punto di partenza per dialogare, in quanto sforzo di passare il limite, guardare oltre confine, oltre tutti i confini, innanzitutto quelli di genere” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 20).

<sup>36</sup> For scholarship on Lahiri’s Italian writing and identity, see Lutzoni (2017) and Milkova Rousseva (2023).

Lahiri's idea of growth: "Writing exists (for me) at the intersection of three precarious, uncertain elements: language, the world, the self. The first is never wholly mine; the second I can only ever know in a partial sense; the third is a malleable and improvised response to the previous two" (2018, p. 1). Smith here, again similar to Ginzburg, Ferrante, and Lahiri, makes clear the contingencies of the self. As the title of her essay collection *Changing My Mind* suggests, Smith is dedicated to evolution. In their essays, these four authors emphasize change and inconsistency, qualities which often come from a place of modesty. Smith contrasts this open kind of writing with a search for perfection or purity: "There is a certain kind of writer—quite often male but by no means exclusively so—who has a fundamental hunger for purity, and for perfection, and this type will always hold the essay form in high esteem. Because essays hold out the possibility of something like perfection" (Smith, 2009b). The authority of these imagined types of essays contrast with the uncertainty of Ginzburg's essays, which offer a space for tentative freedom.

Despite repeatedly claiming literature as a space of security, Ginzburg also narrates doubt as a significant part of a writer's development: "She thinks she has done nothing but pile error upon error. How stupid she has been. She has also posed a great many stupid questions. She has asked whether writing, for her, was a duty or a pleasure. Stupid. It was neither. At the best of times it was, and is, her way of inhabiting the earth" (2003, p. 138).<sup>37</sup> Lahiri found freedom in developing her Italian, which offered a new way to inhabit the earth. In part because her relationship to English had become too defined, Lahiri moved from a language in which she had considerable status, authority, and a Pulitzer Prize to work in Italian: "By writing in Italian, I think I am escaping both my failures with regard to English and my success" (2016, p. 167).<sup>38</sup> She quotes Ginzburg's *Family Lexicon* to explain what she experienced writing *In Other Words* in Italian:

<sup>37</sup> "Pensa che non ha fatto mai altro che ammucciare errori su errori. Che stupido è stato. Si è anche posto una grande quantità di domande stupide. Si è chiesto se scrivere era per lui un dovere o un piacere. Stupido. Non era né l'uno né l'altro. Nei momenti migliori, era ed è per lui come abitare la terra" (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 196). These are the last lines of "Portrait of a writer" ("Ritratto di scrittore") which uses male pronouns to talk about a writer, but is generally read as referring to Ginzburg. The whole essay has been translated referring just to a man (Ginzburg, 1973, pp. 162–168), but also (as in this case) to a woman writer (Ginzburg, 2003, pp. 131–138).

<sup>38</sup> "Scrivendo in italiano, penso di fuggire sia i miei fallimenti nei confronti dell'inglese sia il mio successo" (Lahiri, 2016, p. 166).

“I don’t know if it’s the best of my books, but certainly it’s the only book that I wrote in a state of absolute freedom” (Lahiri, 2016, p. 215).<sup>39</sup> Lahiri explores why she feels this sense of freedom: “How is it possible that when I write in Italian I feel both freer and confined, constricted? Maybe because in Italian I have the freedom to be imperfect” (2016, p. 83).<sup>40</sup> Lahiri, Ferrante, and Smith, like Ginzburg, critique the related concepts of security, perfection, and winning.

Ginzburg views success as problematic for any group, once they are defined as such: “A world made up of the weak and wretched hates the advent of the winners, knowing that all too soon they will take on inhuman ways and unreal, dismal, lugubrious garb. Therefore even if we don’t know which side to support, we feel somehow drawn to the side of the losers. That is all we can do, in our desperate, confused quest for someone we can love without fear of error” (2003, p. 146).<sup>41</sup> As in her statements on resisting the affinity she feels with other people with Jewish origins, Ginzburg is not prescribing a behavior or outlining a system, but hypothesizing about options. Ferrante comments on the arbitrary nature of what leads to winning:

It took me a long time to understand that those classifications are as cruel as they are arbitrary. They pretend that neither socioeconomic inequalities nor sexual and racial discrimination exist, nor the extremely culpable waster of intelligence that results. We draw up lists of the good and the bad as if the many privileges deriving from chance aren’t there: your place of birth, your family, the inequality of opportunities. (2019b, p. 56)<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> “Non so se sia il migliore dei miei libri, ma certo è il solo libro che io abbia scritto in un stato di assoluta libertà” (Lahiri, 2016, p. 214).

<sup>40</sup> “Com’è possibile quando scrivo in italiano, che mi senta sia più libera sia inchiodata, costretta? Forse perché in italiano ho la libertà di essere imperfetta” (Lahiri, 2016, p. 82).

<sup>41</sup> “Essendo il nostro un mondo di infelici e di deboli, detesta generare dei vincitori perché sa che i vincitori vi prederanno subito abitudini disumane e spogli irreali, squallide e lugubri. Per questo noi non sappiamo da che parte stare ma ci sentiamo comunque spinti a stare dalla parte di quelli che perdono. È la sola cosa che possiamo fare nella nostra ricerca disperata e confusa di qualcuno che possiamo amare senza errore” (Ginzburg, 2006, pp. 187–8).

<sup>42</sup> “Ho impiegato parecchio tempo a capire che queste catalogazioni sono tanto crudeli quanto arbitrarie. Esse fanno finta che non esistano le disuguaglianze socioeconomiche, le discriminazioni sessiste e razziste, il conseguente colpevolissimo sciupio di intelligenze. Stiliamo classifiche senza tener conto del caso: il luogo di nascita, la famiglia d’origine, la disparità delle occasioni, etc.” (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 52).

The abhorrence of winning relates to these authors' frequent rejections of categories. Once one belongs to a group, it is hard not to invest in that group's success, above others. Ferrante would like to destroy the grounds upon which winning and losing are based: "If I could, I would eliminate concepts such as failing, winning and losing, which no longer have any basis. If it were really necessary, I would confine myself to a competition like the caucus race that Alice encounters in Wonderland. Nobody loses, everybody wins and there is no failure" (2019b, p. 56).<sup>43</sup> She proposes using Lewis Carroll's literary image to reimagine what it could mean to win or be successful in a world without losers. Literature offers the potential to imagine spaces beyond groups or even maybe identity. Lahiri, with her choice to write in Italian, and Ferrante, with her dedication to anonymity, represent two explorations of authors' potential freedom from identity categories.

It is often not possible to avoid categorization. Ginzburg makes that clear with "neither poor, nor rich," since poverty prevents a certain kind of freedom to escape categorization. Lahiri's choice of freedom is also a luxury: not all authors can afford to move to Italy or expect to find readers in a new language. Ginzburg describes how many ideas of freedom focus on concepts that pertain to the individual thinker and how hard it is to imagine the freedom of others: "Our limits consist basically in the fact that we are unable to imagine a condition other than ours, one that is lacking a comparable expertise with words" (2006, p. 624).<sup>44</sup> Even writing is a space of freedom for only certain people: "For me and a group of people just like me, 'freedom' means writing everything that crosses one's mind" (2006, p. 624).<sup>45</sup> Intellectuals, a label which Ginzburg hates (2006, p. 624), or writers can again become a kind of identity that is potentially positioned above others. Ginzburg ends by proposing that thinking about others' liberty, which may contrast with one's own, may be the only way to achieve freedom:

<sup>43</sup> "Per quello che mi riguarda, se potessi, cancellerei concetti come fallire, vincere, perdere, che allo stato attuale del mondo sono privi di qualsiasi fondamento oggettivo. Se proprio necessario, mi limiterei a gare come quelle progettate da Alice nel Paese delle meraviglie. Lì non si perde, tutti vincono e non c'è mai fallimento" (Ferrante, 2019a, p. 52).

<sup>44</sup> "I nostri limiti consistono essenzialmente nel fatto che non riusciamo a immaginare una condizione diversa dalla nostra, cioè priva d'un simile bagaglio di parole."

<sup>45</sup> "Per me e per un gruppo di persone identiche a me, 'libertà' vuol dire scrivere tutto quello che ci passa per la testa."



Perhaps it would be right and necessary if everyone thought not about his own liberty, but about that of others. If everyone thought about that of others instead of one's own, if everyone were willing to protect the freedom of others instead of his own, we would then be closer to a just division of goods, of privileges, and of freedom among humankind. (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 627)<sup>46</sup>

While Ginzburg's essays are very personal, they also constantly consider other perspectives, which contribute to their modesty and literariness.

Smith argues for the freedom of all writers, but includes the potential danger of "containing multitudes" as an author: "Besides which, a counter-voice in my head detects, in Whitman's lines, not a little entitlement. Containing multitudes sounds, just now, like an act of colonization" (2019).<sup>47</sup> Smith and Ginzburg express doubts about literature itself, the freest space they describe, and its ability to encompass a range of perspectives. These doubts, which shape their fiction and essays, help form their power as authors. Smith describes the danger of believing any self is fixed:

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, writing by women, and by oppressed minorities of all kinds, has wondrously expanded the literary landscape, ennobling griefs that had, historically, either passed unnoticed or been brutally suppressed and caricatured. We're eager to speak for ourselves. But in our justified desire to level or even obliterate the old power structures—to reclaim our agency when it comes to the representation of selves—we can, sometimes, forget the mystery that lies at the heart of all selfhood. Of what a self may contain that is both unseen and ultimately unknowable. (Smith, 2019)

Smith explains how an openness to reading other voices can cause them to become part of oneself: "The voices of characters joined the ranks of all the other voices inside me, serving to make the idea of my 'own voice' indistinct. Or maybe it is better to say: I've never believed myself to have a voice entirely separate from the many voices I hear, read, and internalize

<sup>46</sup> "Forse sarebbe giusto e necessario che ognuno pensasse non alla sua libertà, ma a quella degli altri. Se ognuno pensasse a quella degli altri invece che alla sua propria, se fosse disposto a proteggere quella degli altri in luogo della sua, saremmo allora più vicini a una giusta divisione di beni, di privilegi e di libertà fra gli uomini."

<sup>47</sup> Lucamante (2008) considers these roles in terms of Italian fiction by contemporary women writers.

every day” (Smith, 2019). Smith also posits the presumption needed to discover commonalities and then explains how readers often offer white male writers greater freedom, again revealing why these doubts are especially common among women writers and writers who are not white: “It is to be noted that the argument ‘A white man would never say that!’ is rarely heard and is almost structurally unimaginable. Why? Because to be such a self is to be afforded all possible human potentialities, not only a circumscribed few” (Smith, 2019). Rebecca Walkowitz argues that Lahiri’s move to Italian represents an embrace of not knowing in reaction to how Lahiri has been underestimated as an Indian-American woman: “Learning Italian is thus not so much a decision to give up knowing for not-knowing. It is a decision to choose not-knowing rather than having not-knowing thrust upon her. This project of affirmative not-knowing distinguishes Lahiri” (Walkowitz, 2020, p. 329). Ferrante, Ginzburg, and Smith’s frequent denials of authority could be read similarly.

Smith emphasizes the importance of the possibilities of literature, especially literature written by women and writers who are not white:

Fiction suspected that there is far more to people than what they choose to make manifest. Fiction wondered what likeness between selves might even mean, given the profound mystery of consciousness itself, which so many other disciplines—most notably philosophy—have probed for millennia without reaching any definitive conclusions. Fiction was suspicious of any theory of the self that appeared to be largely founded on what can be seen with the human eye, that is, those parts of our selves that are material, manifest, and clearly visible in a crowd. Fiction—at least the kind that was any good—was full of doubt, self-doubt above all. It had grave doubts about the nature of the self. (2019)

Smith argues for the power of literature that is in part based on doubt. Ginzburg’s earlier concerns about writing from a space and background too unusual to be of broad interest contribute to the development of her suggestive style and her appeal today. In “Natalia Ginzburg or the Possibilities of the Bourgeois Novel” (“Natalia Ginzburg o la possibilità del romanzo borghese,” 1961), Italo Calvino’s description of Ginzburg’s striking style being in part due to insecurity fits the model of literature Smith proposes:

The secret of Natalia’s simplicity is this: the voice that says “I” always deals with people she considers superior to her, situations that seem too complex

for her capacities, and the linguistic and conceptual means she uses to represent them are always a little below what is required. And from this discrepancy poetic tension is born. Poetry has always worked this way: to make the sea pass through a funnel; to decide on a limited number of expressive devices and seek to express with them something extremely complex. Literature nowadays tends to forget about the funnel: we believe that we can write everything, we believe that the sea can be expressed and communicated as such, and instead neither sea nor anything is communicated, only words. (Calvino, 2021)<sup>48</sup>

Ginzburg's fiction suggests the insecurity of the self through contradictions and doubt. Sergio Parussa has explored this quality in terms of the relationship between her writing and reality: "All of Ginzburg's work seems to be characterized by this uncertainty on the part of the narrative voice, which hesitates between the need to tell of a painful reality, glancing at it with a gaze of pity and dismay, and the desire to turn that same reality into an image that is very close to, but not quite, the truth" (Parussa, 2008, pp. 62–3). Ginzburg wants to tell the truth, but also makes clear how hard it can be write about it, which adds to this uncertainty: "Compared to telling the truth, inventing was like playing with a litter of kittens. Telling the truth is like moving through a pack of tigers" (Ginzburg, 2003, p. 137).<sup>49</sup> Ginzburg's metaphor reveals her uncertainty about the ability to tell the truth, a doubt that is embedded in all of her non-fiction. Ginzburg's suggestive voice and interrogation of categories continue to be relevant in part because of the significant role doubt plays in her work. Neither one thing, nor the other, readers today are still exploring Ginzburg's in-between spaces.

<sup>48</sup> "Il segreto della semplicità di Natalia è qui: questa voce che dice 'io' ha sempre di fronte personaggi che stima superiori a lei, situazioni che sembrano troppo complesse per le sue forze, e i mezzi linguistici e concettuali che essa usa per rappresentarli sono sempre un po' al di sotto delle esigenze. Ed è da questa sproporzione che nasce la tensione poetica. La poesia è sempre stata questo: far passare il mare in un imbuto; fissarsi uno strettissimo numero di mezzi espressivi e cercare di esprimere con quello qualcosa di d'estremamente complesso. Adesso la letteratura tende a dimenticare l'imbuto: si crede che si possa scrivere tutto, si crede che il mare possa essere espresso e comunicato in quanto mare, e non si comunica né mare né niente, solo parole" (Calvino, 2003, p. vii).

<sup>49</sup> "A confronto del raccontare il vero, inventare gli sembra che fosse per lui come giocare con una nidiata di gattini; raccontare il vero per lui è come muoversi in mezzo a un branco di tigrì" (Ginzburg, 2006, p. 195).

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