Abstract: This paper will look at ways writing and performance activate forgotten feminist archives through innovative relational methodologies. My PhD at Goldsmiths University is the first to focus on the archive of the neglected Italian feminist collective of artists Le Nemesiache (Naples 1970-1994). This women-only group challenged patriarchal history through their unique use of mythology and ancient heroines in texts, performances and films. Their distinctive productions warrant a new feminist approach to archival material, history and performance; this paper illustrates the innovative methodology necessary to activate their archive while offering new performative and feminist knowledge. I will focus on the use of writing, performance and re-enactment as practices which unveil how Le Nemesiache’s archive contribute to a new understanding of historical events. I will expand on peripheral histories and archival research as ways to allow new forms of nomadic affirmative social relations. By combining the different temporalities of re-enactment with the displacement and translation of Le Nemesiache’s visual and political activity, I will argue for the necessity of an original discourse and practice on alternative art histories and herstories. In particular I will analyse the material and discursive entanglements happening between the research object (Le Nemesiache), the research context and the researcher in my writing and production of the performance (Un)wanted Proximity.

Keywords: Performance. Archive. Relationality. Displacement. Herstories.

LECTURER 1
Lava, vulcani e sangue. Lava, vulcani e sangue. Lava, vulcani e sangue. We begin with the event having taken place already. In the archive. An image from a history: a tableau of women in a black and white photograph. Long-haired, they are the Sibyls. They are sitting in a circle indoors, while their room floats in the blue sky above a dormant volcano. This image is dear to its clouds.

LECTURER 2
Lava, vulcani e sangue. Did I say it well? It is our present prologue. Lava, volcanos and blood as the philosopher Lina Mangiacapre liked to say. Mysterious words. I think we are talking about her here. She is sitting in the picture. In the seventies she said that history was written in their blood, the blood of women. So in the picture they are waiting for the explosion of their veins. They would walk in the world splashing their story like lava.
But tonight, if you agree I want this image to be the anticipation of something other. The preparation for an experience that won’t be believed, like one of Cassandra’s predictions. Because my presence here, as Helena, is part of a story. What is real is cracking in this journey. What gets in when you make the cut? (DAMIANI, 2017)

This is the end of the prologue in this paper. The prologue was a quotation from the script How to Sing a Prophecy, which I wrote for a performance that was devised in collaboration with
actor Helena Rice. The performance took place at Santarcangelo dei Teatri (Italy) and Goldsmiths University (London) in June 2017.

This essay offers introductions to arguments, fragments from performed texts and academic omens. It reflects on my research on the entanglements between subjective translation, prophecy and dramaturgy; these entanglements have emerged from my work on and relation with the archive of the feminist collective Le Nemesiache from Naples (Italy). The collective was started in 1970 by the philosopher and artist Lina Mangiacapre, whom is mentioned in the script above.

The paper brings forward research and attempts to do so by eradicating the distinction between theory and practice. Between research as pure theory or as pure interpretation and art as pure practice. With this I am referring to Gayatri Spivak’s ideas on rhetoric and cultural explanation. In an interview from 1990, Spivak recalls Paul de Man’s description of rhetoric as “the name for the residue of indeterminacy which escapes the system” (Sipiora, Atwill, Spivak, 1990, p.295). In Spivak’s view, rhetoric – which in the interview is defined as “the specific circumstances of the enunciation of cultural explanations and the construction of addressers and addresses”– is seen as that which enacts the tension in the binary of theory and practice. This situated enunciation of rhetoric reveals the moment of productive crisis between the two. The vertiginous amount of indeterminacy that belongs to both. The rhetorical context of cultural explanations shows how “practice persistently brings the notion of theory into crisis” and vice versa. Thus Spivak argues that considering rhetoric may be helpful in highlighting the shaky hierarchies between, for example, creative writing and literary theory (Sipiora, Atwill, Spivak, 1990, p.293) What interpretations can one or another convey? What happens when the boundary between pure research and pure practice cracks?

By departing from this distinction, what shape can research take?

LECTURER 1
In this white box tonight, and in the box that is over here now there is a collection of people, places, prophecies and songs, notes for a dramaturgy.

LECTURER 2
But what would you like to hear?

After the prologue, I am given a box, another figure for the audience to feel. I shuffle what is inside, and I pick a card out. But I am not Cassandra, or Hecuba, Lina, or Demeter, my name is Helena.
I have a statement for this moment: There exists a sharing that is such before it is formalised in speech. A moment of infancy perhaps. Like a game played sitting in a circle on a polished floor. It is an inner movement. It comes before the tragedy of this communication, the narrative written by you. It is a memory which endures even after the moment of disbelief. The revelation of the lie. When my acting stops being confident, and the untranslatability of this sharing is made clear. (DAMIANI, 2017)

With these words the actor Helena Rice addresses the other character in the performance, who is the author, myself. After the prologue, she utters her lines on the discomfort of missed identification. A form of untranslatability becomes clear.

In another essay entitled the *Politics of Translation*, Spivak contemplates the sheer difficulty in translating the rhetorical nature of every language (Spivak, 1993, p.180). By this the scholar means the specific circumstances of cultural explanations, the situatedness of enunciation, but also the system of references in language beyond grammar and logic. Rhetoric breaks the surface of language with its disruptive figuration: the allegorical power to project meaning beside language itself.

The scholar associates rhetoric with the condition of knowing, whereas logic is identified with the effect of knowing. Without the engagement with the rhetoricity of the original, a translation of this may imply the loss of its otherness. And Spivak warns her readers by affirming: “The experience of contained alterity in an unknown language spoken in a different cultural milieu is uncanny” (Spivak, 1993, p.181).

By claiming that the translation is the most intimate act of reading, Spivak’ theories seem to depart from her colleague Paul de Man’s own deconstructionism. According to de Man, translation necessarily fails. Analysing Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Task of the Translator”, de Man describes the impossibility that the translator faces by working on a language that is abstracted and expropriated (Attell, 2012, p.78). For de Man, the desire to say something, the need to communicate, shouldn’t be inherent in the task of the translator. He writes:

> [the] naiveté of the poet [is] that he has something to say, that he has to convey a meaning which does not necessarily relate to language. [By contrast, t]he relationship of the translator to the original is the relationship between language and language […]. (ATTELL, 2012, p.80)

This relationship is thus purely technical. Whereas Spivak hails the figuration of language and its rhetorical condition, for de Man the translator abandons herself and any “extra linguistic” referent to operate on pure language.
But can such an operation be conceived? Is pure language the residue that is visible in translation?

De Man’s concept leaves the subjectivity of the addressee behind. In fact rhetoric, that indeterminacy that cannot be translated, opens up to individual and collective intrusion. Yet it is precisely rhetoric as the condition of knowing which determines its effect and the logic of language. To be able to understand a work in translation one needs to be familiar with the contingent nature of the translation itself; with the rhetoricity of the original text. My research practice exposes the friction between these different versions of translation. Following Spivak’s essay again,

If you want to make the translated text accessible, try doing it for the person who wrote it. The problem comes clear then, for she is not within the same history of style. […] The accessible level is the level of abstraction where the individual is already formed, where one can speak individual rights. When you hang out and with a language away from your own (Mitwegsein) so that you want to use that language by preference, sometimes, when you discuss something complicated, then you are on the way to making a dimension of the text accessible to the reader, with a light and easy touch, to which she does not accede in her everyday. […] (SPIVAK, 1993, p.181)

To hang out with a language away from your own while trying to make a translated text accessible for the person who wrote it. This is one of the main tasks of translation according to Gayatri Spivak. It is an intimate immersion in the situatedness of language. It is time-consuming and it is revealing.

Therefore in an extended sense, translation can become the bringing forward of the rhetoricity of a language. The movement to show a space of resistance to translation itself – indicating the impossibility of transferring contingent content – while simultaneously making accessible the conditions which the addressee started from as well as the ones of the addressees. Translation happens between departure from somewhere and arrival to somewhere else. Within this journey, my research interrogates the ways in which it is possible to avoid giving up the alterity of this feminist archive from Naples. Language as pure technicality gives in. Translation takes place in the moment of enunciation through a plurality of subjects.

LECTURER 2

In the speaking of prophecy, the speaker is an interpreter. You said: I will translate this for you.

LECTURER 1
Lava, volcanos and blood.

LECTURER 2
Helena, that is me, can place a lens on her teeth at this point.

LECTURER 1
In fact, if the prophecy lingers clear in the mind, in the inside, it is as strenuous to replicate it into the outside. My vision moves faster than me and I am pulled back inside. What I carry across are new etymologies. New roots. When I am the Sybil in Cumae, for example, I write words on oak leaves that are scattered away by the wind. When they fly, I let them go. What is left at the entry of my cave in Cumae cannot be said, yet it is a form of touching with words, with names. The mystery lies in the gap, in the branch of mythical connections between the leaves. It cannot be owned.

LECTURER 2
In cultic tradition, the language of the prophetess was articulated by male interpreters. Therefore words were expressed but remained veiled. They were seen through a membrane. This membrane was thought to cover women’s deranged borders. A vibrant language was carried over.

LECTURER 1
I said: it was the wind puffing their veils. (DAMIANI, 2017)

In an article published in 1977 entitled “There is much to dig out from the culture of Cumae” (in Italian: “Ce n’è da scavare nella cultura di Cuma”) Lina Mangiacapre criticised the building of canals for filtering waters near the archeological site of Cumae (Mangiacapre, 1977). A recent explosion had polluted the nearby Lake Avernus. This site was the location for some of the collective’s films, such as Dido is not Dead from 1987, and nourished their whole imagery.

The ancient city of Cumae was established as a Greek colony in the eighth century BCE, becoming renowned for being the seat of the Cumean Sibyl. In the article, Mangiacapre describes the matriarchal culture of Cumae, one where science, political and economic decisions were controlled by the Sibyls. This changed dramatically during the Roman Empire, during which the oppression of women became the norm. According to Mangiacapre, by digging into the Cumean civilisation the origins of Roman imperialism would become apparent. Cumae showed how the current paradigm of progress through advancement and technology is equivalent to the destruction of the past.
The Sybil of Cumae is one of the characters in the script of the performance. In the passage above prophecy is combined with translation. In fact, prophecy can be said to be the mediation of a series of visions by a specific subject. Prophecy is also intended as a prediction directed towards an unknowable future. It marks an experience that cannot be had, something that is akin to the experience of translation.

What can prophecy translate? And what does it mean for women to be the mediators of a prophecy?

Historically prophecy has denoted different kind of messages depending on the identity of its speaker. While prophetic figures such as Virgil in Dante have been represented as authoritative voices, the language of women prophetesses is usually depicted as incantatory and embodied. Nicole Louraux in her book *The Mourning Voice* reports how in cultic tradition prophetesses such as Pythia and Cassandra had visions which required interpreters (Louraux, 2002, p. 74). Translation by men was needed if the prophecies were to be articulated. In her words, “a college of male interpreters endeavoured to translate them into a language that remained veiled” (Louraux, 2002, p. 76).

An unintelligible kind of vocality appeared to belong to the voice of the prophetess. Through the sonorous quality of prophecy a different notion of pure language emerges. One that identifies pure language with the state of infancy; not with the technical operation of translation, but with a transcendental experience in language.

In fact the mysterious quality of prophecy can be read through the concept of infancy in Giorgio Agamben’s work. Quoting from one of Wittgenstein’s lectures, the philosopher introduced his view on the relation between language and the world as such: ‘the miracle of the existence of the world, albeit as expressing nothing within language, is the existence of language itself’ (Agamben, 2007, p. 10).

There exists a language which characterise fundamentally the human experience of the world. Therefore according to Agamben the transcendental potential of reality lies not in the absence of words but in the difference between language and speech; in Benveniste’s terms between semiotic and semantic.

Semiotic designates linguistics signs that can be recognised or not, whereas semantic is the specific mode of signification that define language ‘as a producer of messages. [...] The semantic order corresponds to the world of enunciation and the universe of discourse. (AGAMBEN, 2007, p.62)
Benveniste believed there couldn’t be any transition from one to the other. Agamben’s theory of infancy suggests instead that such a transition can be individuated in the historical-transcendental dimension before speech, before signified expression, which is infancy itself. In Agamben semiotic and semantic are in constant communication: the elements of semantic produce discourse to fall back into pure language again.

In linguistic terms, the sonorous quality of prophecy can open up a dialogue between pure language and speech. Women’s prophecy could be understood as corresponding to one of these moments of transcendental infancy, expressing both the ‘semiotic sea of nature’ and a form of authority. As Agamben affirms:

[…] in-fancy is not simply a given whose chronological site might be isolated, nor is it like an age or a psychosomatic state which a psychology or a paleoanthropology could construct as a human fact independent of language. (AGAMBEN, 2007, p. 64)

The fluid articulation of prophecy seem to converge together enchantment and discourse, scattered units and pronouncements. An example of the fragmented communication of prophecy is given by the figure of the Cumaean Sibyl.

In Virgil Aeneid the Sibyl’s prophetic voice is expressed through her songs and her writing on oak leaves (Virgil, 19 B.C.E, Book 6). She would place the leaves at the entrance of her cave in Cumae, but if the wind blew them away she wouldn’t try to gather them together. Those who asked for her prophecy were thus left with the individual leaves and the Sibyl’s voice, names but not comprehensive prepositions. The terms on the scattered leaves can be seen as an early visual manifestation of Benveniste’s semiotic signs. They were words recognised by the members of a linguistic community but they lacked those connections that would make the sequence of words understood: they were bereft of the symbolism of the language of the father.

In this way prophecy links the passing on of authority and cultural tradition with the experience of infancy and mystery. In fact for Agamben infancy not only indicates a transcendental experience in language. Infancy is also defined as that which allows individuals to grasp the mystery of experience: the impossibility of fully communicating in the passage between language and speech, a transition which according to the philosopher determines history. In his book The Unspeakable Girl the theorist points at the meaning of mystery in initiatory rituals: mystery was the expression of gestures, acts and words (Agamben, 2014, p.33). It meant the coincidence of thought
and intuition, therefore it couldn’t be phrased in speech. The songs and gestures of the Cumaean Sibyl, the importance of her voice, find a reference in Agamben’s explanation of mystery.

Through the above comparisons prophecy emerges as a language-based hypothesis on the future: a prediction traditionally fragmented, and as such suspended in time, but also historically determined and determining. If prophecy can be seen to enact the passage between language and speech then its gesture becomes historical.

My practice brings together the memory of the archive and contingent prophecies. It does so because, as neuroscientists have proved recently, memory doesn’t only adapt the past to the present, but through constructive processes it allows individuals to simulate the future and prepare for it. (Ofengendernm, 2014, p.42). Memory itself concerns the future.

If the archive is the memory, can a dramaturgy from the archive become the message of a prophecy? A dramaturgy entails theories, speech but also a prefigured body. Dramaturgy contains gesture and discourse. Moving further into the dramaturgical subject, what happens when prophecy becomes a method for dramaturgy, when prediction and disbelief are the hinges of performative composition?

In this instance, you encounter figures of women, volcanoes, laments and attempts at making fables.

LECTURER 2
The Sybil comes every night in my dream. The image I dig out in the morning is one of a volcano as a prop. A volcano as a prop. I explain this thesis to the author. I am mumbling a little. I see it as a structure that supports as well as an object in the mise en scène, rising at the back of the stage. Just the crest of it.

LECTURER 1
Can you see it? The volcano might serve the game, being both a figure in nature, therefore unspeakable, and an element that can have a catastrophic effect on reality. Its violence erupting among the players of this text.

LECTURER 2
I will show you its rage and mine.

LECTURER 1
‘Vesuvian temper’ for example is a rare lyric expression to describe one’s sudden outbursts. This adjective was coined by recalling the destructive power of Mount Vesuvius, a volcano in Italy near
In this combination of words a release of being takes place. Identity and geography float up, together.

LECTURER 2
I wonder if as a performer, I can only be the reflection in the mirror, never the volcano. […]

LECTURER 2
Act two is owning the shrill sound of Mount Vesuvius. I found this clip the other day, I think it would sound good here.

We climb and climb beside one another and the mountain burns. A fizzing sound. Then a bubbling like sinking in liquid. You are in a perennial love affair with this place. I try to catch up with you, between the smokes and the flames. Others, sitting in this space, might think that yours is a common fascination, a human desire for the extraordinary repetition of nature. Watching and lingering on destruction. But yours is not. It is an exhaustion. You lunge at the blazing rocks inside. You don’t keep to the edge. You are the eyewitness of the mountain’s inner secret. It is you who roars and rambles. You, are the author of a geological fable. But it doesn’t flare up. I am watching but from faraway. And you and me can’t sing to one another. (DAMIANI, 2017)

References
Relacionalidade e Performance: O Arquivo de Le Nemesiache

Resumo: Este ensaio olhará as formas que escrevendo e desempenhando ativar esquecido arquivos feministas de através metodologias relacional inovativa. Meu doutoramento a Universidade de Goldsmiths é a primeira focar no arquivo da negligenciada colectiva feminista Italiana das Artistas Le Nemesiache (Nápoles 1970-1994). Este grupo feito de só mulheres desafiada história patriarcal de através seu único uso de mitologia e heroínas antigas em textos, performances e filmes. O distintivo produções does seus justifica uma nova abordagem feminista o material de arquivo, história e performance; esta ensaio ilustra a metodologia inovativa necessario ativar seu arquivo enquanto criando novas performances e conhecimento feminista. Vou focar no uso de escrevendo, desempenhando e reexecução como práticas que desvenda como o arquivo esquecido de Le Nemesiache contribuir o um novo entendimento de eventos históricos. Expandirei em histórias periférico e pesquisa arquivamento como formas permitir novas formas de relações sociais nômades. Combinando temporalidades diferentes de reexecução com o deslocamento e tradução de atividade visual e política de Le Nemesiache, argumentarei pra necessidade de um discurso original e uma prática sobre historias alternativas das arte e herstories (historias dela). Em particular analisarei o material e discursivo emaranhados acontecendo entre o objeto pesquisa (Le Nemesiache), a contexto pesquisa e o pesquisador em minha escrita e produção da performance Unwanted Proximity.