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Confronting my Palestinianess in Writing Pedagogies *A Critical View from Lebanon*

Amany Al-Sayyed

American University of Beirut

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Abstract

This article offers an auto-theoretical, exploratory account of teaching writing as a Palestinian educator at the American University of Beirut in 2023–2024 during the war on Gaza and the escalation of violence in Lebanon. Written in a series of chronologically organized vignettes, the manuscript blends memoir, correspondence, lesson plans, and critical pedagogy to document how war enters the classroom through microaggressions, silencing, and institutional failure to recognize politically situated harm. Drawing inspiration from the essay tradition the article foregrounds process, uncertainty, and affect as legitimate forms of scholarly inquiry. Reflections on formative teachers in Canada, a Jewish-Canadian childhood friendship, and intergenerational memory illuminate how race, identity, and worldliness shape pedagogical becoming. The article situates experiential teaching during genocide within composition studies, arguing for the exploratory essay as an ethical and pedagogical response to crisis. It further details curricular revisions undertaken during wartime, including collaborative assessment, anti-thesis essay structures, and the use of fairytales—particularly Palestinian children’s literature—as a means of restoring imagination, solidarity, and care. Ultimately, the article testifies to the necessity of courageous dialogue, institutional accountability, and pedagogies that resist silence while affirming relational hope amid devastation.



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Dear A¹,

After our brief encounter in the classroom

It felt like I broke open

and plunged into the eyes of Gaza

Introduction

My intention in this explorative essay is to map an absent path of overcoming as a Palestinian-Canadian educator in Beirut, Lebanon. I reflect on a specific historical moment in the region when I realized I'm still teaching rhetoric and composition at the American University of Beirut even when the sky above campus was being ruptured by military attacks on the city during the first weeks of genocide on Gaza in 2023 and the subsequent escalation of violence in Beirut. My article expresses itself in a way that plays with the genre of explorative essays. Anyone who has attempted to study the essay knows how difficult, in a good way, the genre is to define. Research shows how it doesn't pretend that everything is cleared and worked out. Rather, it hopes to reflect a genuine record of the issue at hand. Similarly, in this essay I attempt to reflect a troubled yet resilient teacher's mind at work and at play with survival against systemic silencing in the Lebanese classroom. The end goal is to heal but to do so, we need to voice our truth first.

This manuscript begins with no surprise that teachers in general who stood with Palestine after October 7th, 2023 (AJLabs, 2024) have faced hostility, polarization and aggression across American campuses worldwide by Zionist vitriol or silent leadership in certain pockets on campus. Lebanon was no different. One day, I witnessed in my writing classroom a sudden rupture ripping violently through the atmosphere of my peaceful, inclusive and safe classrooms just like the sonic bombs were cutting through Beirut's sky changing our lives in one drastic moment, forever. Before the rupture, I worked hard to create joy in my classroom, joy in including every voice and experience, similar to the classrooms I've inhabited growing up in Canada where free speech, critical thinking and unconditional student support thrived, at least in my experience. This school system worked well for me as an immigrant with a big imagination and an absent education on Palestinian history. I could be anyone I wanted to be.

But this method had its shelf-life - it suddenly expired and no longer served me when Beirut shifted meaning from peace to war. Witnessing this historical moment, I was led to reflect on my entire existence in schools and universities from Canada to Beirut

Teacher David

For the longest time since 2010², when I'd go out for coffee with my teacher-friends here in Beirut, I'd find myself telling tales about my upbringing in Canada since 1995, the superstar

¹ A is for Assailant, Attacker, Aggressor in the classroom. I choose not to name experience. I'm still in the process of choosing the language I use to describe this classroom moment.

² I moved to Lebanon in 2010 after just being accepted to a PhD program at the University of British Columbia in Interdisciplinary Studies. I came to "connect with my roots," to be in my mother's homeland but mostly, to unearth my late Palestinian father's history, his life and works in the refugee camps. I succeeded. In 2014, I placed

teachers I've had. I didn't know it at the time but my love for these immigrant heroes made me feel like I was being taught true courage. I understood at the end of the scholastic year in high school and university that the most important thing to learn is the act of being an agent of change in the colonial classroom. Top on the list of teachers in Canada that impacted me are Derek Gregory from human geography at the University of British Columbia, David Chariandy in World Literature, and Paul Matthew St Pierre from the English department at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. I distinctly remember David saying to me during his course on Caribbean literature: "Amany, you're always such a treat to have in class." Fast forward to the present time in Beirut. I hear that David published a novel addressed to his daughter titled *A letter to My Daughter*. In the first chapter, he mentions how confident she is in her body, how she possesses a *wordliness* distinct from his own, crossing borders comfortably and encountering new people in different places. As I continue reading, I get to a paragraph in which David mentions Lebanon as a source of inspiration, how the poetry of Khalil Gibran had transferred over to Black culture through a musical band of Black women who sing his words "your children are not your children, they are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but they are not from you, for their souls dwell in a place of tomorrow." David hopes to pass on his wisdom to his daughter.

Janine/جنين

When my father the lover of Palestine died, he took Palestine away with him. His passing had meant living with my Lebanese mother who was tasked with the impossible operation of raising five children alone with no energy left in her to teach them anything about the Arab world in general. In her role as both father and mother surviving in a new country, she neither forwarded nor retracted any of the teachings my father had left behind. The result was that Palestine slowly erased itself from our lives. New people came into the scene as I grew up in high school. These included friends who were predominantly Jewish-Canadian because this was the demographic of the neighborhood we lived in. Later I'd learn that I was experiencing a similar lifestyle happening across the globe in the occupied territories where some Palestinian children live with Jews, Muslims and Christians alike in certain cities, occupying the same space, falling in love and even getting married. I had no idea that history was starting to draw its map onto my small immigrant body already.

I remember distinctly the day I was in art class in grade nine. I was sitting at a big round table alone with a paper and paint brush quietly drawing my version of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*. Suddenly, I heard the classroom door open and in walked a girl with the biggest smile on her face, sparkly big brown eyes like dark olive, curly black hair down to her shoulders, round figure. It felt like looking in the mirror because she resembled me. I liked her spirit. She came and sat next to me:

Hi, she said. "Wow that's pretty. I love it"

"Thanks, are you new?"

"Yeah, just transferred. My name is Janine"

"Hi, I'm Amany"

his unearthed novels, and radio broadcast recordings about Palestine from Ghana and Malta, and placed them in the Palestinian Oral History Archives at the American University of Beirut.

“Janine,” she continued while I was painting the sea blue, “is the name of my mother’s town in Israel.” “My dad,” she continued while I painted the sun yellow, “is Palestinian with an Israeli passport. After high school, my plan is to go back to my village to discover my namesake.”

“Okay”, I said and continued painting circles around the sun

We became friends. Unlike myself at the time, Janine owned a story to tell about her place in history. She imagined it very clearly She knew about the geography of her namesake – that Janine is a city in the West Bank near El Khalil. She knew that the legal system in her birthplace says she follows her mother’s religion which automatically grants her citizenship to the state of Israel through the Law of Return. She perceived of herself historically as a rightful citizen. In contrast, I didn’t know anything about the Jewish usurpation of our land which had meant the loss of Palestinian homes. I didn’t learn about Jewish immigration back from the “slums” of Europe and North America, about the advancement of the Jewish people in the diaspora which had meant the vanishing of the indigenous Palestinians into the slums and ghettoes of their own land. I didn’t know that the British Mandate was playing favorites like an unjust parent and choosing to empower the Zionist project over Palestinian legitimacy. I didn’t know what settlements were. I didn’t know of the U.N partition of Palestine into an Arab state and a Jewish state, fertile plains given to the Jewish state as opposed to the useless desert to the Palestinians³.

Rupture

What happened? What interrupted this childhood script running the teacher in me until the start of the genocide in Gaza? I found myself reaching out to leadership to help me understand. In a letter addressed to the program I described what happened in my class while military violence escalated in the city including assassinations and targeted bombings:

The Email:

I've been experiencing a strange amount of misconduct recently under these political circumstances, especially one section I'm teaching where friction has been occurring in escalation over time.

For example, one time, I forget last minute to take attendance so I quickly attempt to do it. One student from the misconduct group remarks in derogatory tone: "we came for the attendance, you think we came to see your pretty face?"

These individual behaviors are supported by the misconduct group. They continue to find creative ways to diminish my success at teaching the class.

These behaviours never happened to me before in a decade of teaching at AUB under a range of political atmospheres – not at this level of continued organized disrespect.

I write this letter to ask: are there existing systems of support? A person/center in the department to approach?

I was told by the program to spend extra hours (scheduling beyond office hours) consulting with these students individually, but I don't know if this is best practice.

³ Information taken from Dr. Salman Abu Sitta’s Atlas of Palestine housed in the Palestine Land Studies Center at the American University of Beirut. Read only.

I think this experience is not for the teacher to resolve individually in isolation from systemic support

In time, I found myself reaching out to colleagues in confidence and informally asking them this question: “Have you been experiencing overwhelmingly strange student misconduct lately?” I honestly wasn’t expecting to hear things from teachers like: “It got so bad, I left and went home shaking and crying uncontrollably”.

After a day at work, I’m sitting at my desk writing reference letter for a student applying to graduate school. This is what the university wanted to know about him:

- What are your impressions of the applicant’s character and maturity?
- If you have any reason to doubt the integrity of this applicant, please explain why

I sat there thinking this is what the outside world values: character and integrity..

Composing during Genocide

How I teach the explorative essay took a radical departure from the thesis/support structure. Before Gaza, I was teaching equally the traditional form of the genre as well as the explorative side of it. But in time, I was already beginning to find more meaning in exploring the unconventional work of Paul Heilker (1991, 1996, 2002, 2018; Heilker & Vanderberg, 2005; Heilker & Wong, 2011) who writes about how teaching the essay is supposed to feel like running uphill, swimming against the tide, alone. This solitary journey involves going against the flow, battling against power and eventually earning attractive rewards for engaging in the struggle. You experience new, more powerful vantage points like fluidity and freedom of movement; stronger, more active, more flexible positions from which to work. All this liberatory language from an Americanist in the field sounded relevant and on point.

I recall Audre Lorde’s powerful message in “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action” where she brings into life the reasons why we resist defining these murky classroom moments and placing them neatly in a research paper that is proper or well behaved. Lorde writes about the difference between speaking and speaking brokenly:

I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood. That the speaking profits me beyond any other effect” (1984, p. 40).

These poetic reflections drew me towards action.

I also came to realize how risky it can be to radicalize the curriculum during genocide. Consequently, Heilker’s words felt more and more dangerous in this new context, like Beirut, like Gaza trying to survive in the world- classroom. At the same time, I felt restored, validated in his words on overcoming: “teaching the essay requires both the teacher and students to leave the *safety of known roles* and ways of thinking, to occupy new, perhaps uncomfortable positions” (Heilker, 1996, p. 87).

The openness of his thinking allowed me to see the essay as an anti-genre, an energy where anything and everything is questioned.

Community Rubrics

One of the first action-steps I decided to take was to transform the grading rubric designed by colleagues during the 2020 turn to online teaching because of the Covid 19 pandemic. This new rubric aimed to assess student writing as a **community** - rather than in pairs or individually.

Collaborate to Discover Ideas and to Compose and Revise Texts.				
Criteria	Exemplary	Strong	Satisfactory	Needs Improvement
1. Plan, communicate and make group decisions about writing	<p>Suggests ways that the group could manage and complete the work, noting tradeoffs with different approaches.</p> <p>Suggests roles or tasks based upon the unique knowledge, abilities, or interests of those in the group.</p> <p>Asks for other perspectives and input from group members.</p> <p>Suggests ways the group can make decisions when there is a disagreement.</p>	<p>Adds ideas about how best to manage and complete the work.</p> <p>Suggests roles or tasks for the group that are equitable.</p> <p>Rephrases the thinking of the group and connects ideas to move the group forward.</p> <p>Identifies the main areas of disagreement in the group to help focus the conversation.</p>	<p>Restates some ways the group discussed how best to manage and complete the work.</p> <p>Volunteers a way that they could help the group.</p> <p>Identifies when the thinking of the group does not make sense or is lacking in some way.</p> <p>Withdraws from the discussion when the group disagrees.</p>	<p>Identifies one way to “best” manage and complete the work or fails to identify any way.</p> <p>Agrees to complete their role or task the group assigned and does it their own way OR does minimal or no work.</p> <p>Restates the thinking of others, or is simply inattentive to others.</p> <p>Asks questions of the group to better understand their thinking from an uninvolved perspective.</p> <p>Displays inflexibility that sometimes causes conflict in the group.</p>
2. During the writing process (idea discovery, composition, and revision), CONTRIBUTE resources, ideas, and writing as well as SUPPORT group members	<p>Contributes important ideas that move the group forward.</p> <p>Provides resources to support the group.</p> <p>Suggests ways to improve the writing.</p> <p>Gives feedback on the writing of others throughout: on ideas, organization and language</p>	<p>Brainstorms ideas with the group.</p> <p>Finds resources for others, when asked.</p> <p>Asks the group to consider ways to improve the writing.</p> <p>Asks group members if they need any input or feedback.</p>	<p>Identifies the ideas and resources they need to complete the work.</p> <p>Asks the group what help they need or resources they have.</p> <p>Shares their work and looks at others’ work at the end of the project.</p>	<p>Focuses on what they are asked to do or is simply uninvolved.</p> <p>Simply completes their part of the writing group project on time or fails to do so.</p> <p>Lets group members figure out what they need on their own.</p>
3. Reflect on and adapt individual and group processes to ensure writing that meets assignment requirements throughout the process (during idea discovery, composition, and revision)	<p>Adjusts their efforts to ensure quality work and smooth process</p> <p>Actively solicits feedback from writing partner/s</p> <p>Judiciously incorporates feedback from writing partner/s</p>	<p>Monitors the writing group’s project quality and process</p> <p>Accepts and uses feedback from writing partner/s</p>	<p>Identifies how the writing of others shows quality.</p> <p>Acknowledges the feedback of writing partner/s but may not be able to make sound implementation decisions</p>	<p>Simply focuses on getting their part of the writing group project done, or lacks focus and fails completely or partially to complete their part.</p>

The second step I had taken was to re-think the essay's language frontiers, gearing away from traditional thesis/support. I used the following handout:

Language We Use

Introduction

anecdote -- universal or common situation
 I decided to pursue the question...
 Although I was conscious..., I was largely unaware....
 For this research project...
 This question deserves to be examined... / I suspect that these....

Body paragraphs

I first needed to learn more about...
 I started by reading...
 I learned that...
 I next turned to...
 I found the results of ... survey / puzzling...
 The survey gave me a clear picture... / reveals how...
 ...gave me basic understanding of...
 These discoveries helped me to better form my understanding of...
 Needing more in-depth information about..., I next turned to...
 As I proceeded with my investigation focusing on...,
 I was taken aback by...
 The result showed...
 I was not surprised...
 I wanted to explore more...
 Although I was not surprised..., I was also unaware....
 I located more links...
 After considering the views, I felt I understood...
 I was fortunate to come upon...
 What I find interesting is that...
 I proceeded with my investigation...
 I felt I needed to start looking for...
 I got further understanding of this aspect of ... from another researcher...
 After learning more,
 I discovered ... so I started with an article...
 For the next stage of my research...
 Although the next two sources I found ..., they did prove interesting information...
 In contrast to most of my research so far...
 I still had doubts about...
 I found myself wondering if...
 I felt I needed to start looking for...
 I wanted to address something...

Conclusion

I have concluded...
 After learning some... I have concluded that...
 As I continue with my research, I am not sure what thesis I will assert...
 I still want to do more research on...
 I hope to explore this issue further...
 I am still thinking about...
 I remember a passage...
 I will assert for my final project...
 I have not found studies that explore...

Fairytales Endings

Finally, I decided to bring in the literary genre of fairytales to re-activate care and imagination in the classroom.

I invited students to write a fairytale based on inspiration from their favorite children's story they heard growing up. The fairytale's topic had to center around life in Lebanon these days.

I brought in Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani's children's story titled *The Little Lantern* (inspired by a writing workshop I attended in the city at the time) as a supplementary reading that I would use if I were writing this assignment. I paired this document with general guidelines on how to write a fairytale.

To end this paper, I share with you one of the fairytales submitted by a team of students at the end of the semester. Here's an anonymized sample written by a community of students in the classroom who adapted the Kanafani fairytale to express how they perceived events happening in class, and off campus, around them:

The Little Cedar: Liberating Fairytales from the Lebanese Classroom

Note : In the original version of *The Little Lantern*, an honorable king dies and leaves his only daughter as heiress to the throne. In his last will, the king tells his daughter that to become the queen of the domain, she has to bring back the sun into the castle.

Once upon a time in a castle nestled away in the high mountains of Lebanon, Amina, the daughter of the local king, awoke to the news of her father's passing. Since the king had only this young girl, everyone was saddened by what had happened and wondered who would rule as the next royal. After receiving this terrible news, Amina rushed to the cedar, where she usually goes in times of hardship. The cedar encouraged her, "To remain strong, keep in mind that many others are facing harder circumstances; like us, we have endured difficulties as disasters, storms, and wars for thousands of years, but we still, and will always, be here". In the next day, the king's short will was read to Amina by an old sage that her dad always trusted. The short will says, "My lovely daughter to become the princess of the kingdom of Chouf you should bring all the cedars of Lebanon to our castle." Upon hearing what her father had requested, Amina was shocked and certain that she would never be able to carry all the trees to the castle. However, the elderly wise man urged her to comply with the king's order and follow her father's wishes.

When Amina's uncle learned that the king intended for his little daughter to succeed him as the kingdom's next ruler, he ran to Amina and rudely shouted, "Do not try Amina, I will be the new king and this castle will be ruled by my power." Then, he added, "Your father didn't want you to be the new queen so he asked you to bring all the cedars which cannot be done, so go have a rest." Amina was taken surprise by his actions and retorted, "You are dreaming, and what my father wanted will happen." The elderly wise man was pleased with what Amina had accomplished. Amina rushed after that to the highest point of the castle trying to find a solution. She felt disappointed but at the same time encouraged by what the cedar told her and wanted to do what she can to prove her uncle wrong.

Amina goes to the Chouf forests the next morning in search of inspiration for her coronation. When she went to the cedar tree to ask for counsel, the tree was at a loss for words and informed her that she couldn't accomplish her request. "You are not only incapable of

achieving that, but you are also erasing Lebanon's identity if you try to pull a cedar tree up by its roots." Amina didn't know what to do because the only place where she could feel the safety and get support was closed to her. Amina fell in the valley minutes later as she proceeded down the hill and became crammed between the stones. As she was imprisoned and alone in the valley, Amina felt gloom escape in. As the sun began to set, she tried to remove herself, but the harder she fought, the closer the rocks seemed to grasp her. As night fell, the cool mountain air spread in, and Amina trembled in fear and cold. Three butterflies suddenly approach her. "Why are you here alone crying, how are you stuck here?" questioned the biggest one. Amina told them what happened and asked for their assistance. The butterflies tried to pull the rocks with their wings, but they didn't know how because their bird partner wasn't there. "I will ask him to go give me 10 minutes," the youngest stated. True to its word, the youngest butterfly returned quickly, followed by a bird with vivid feathers and sharp, perceptive eyes. It was a Lebanese Jay, known for its resourcefulness. The bird appraised the butterflies' task, and they were all able to save Amina. Amina said happily, "I thank you all for your help, you rescued me!"

Amina dashed to her room after a long, traumatic day. When she went to sleep, she noticed a message written on it: "If you keep crying, you will not be able to bring all the cedars to the castle." Amina's strength was restored by this sentence. Early the next morning, the uncle arrived at her room, waking her up uneasily saying, "Didn't you give up on making your father's will come true? Stop that and join my efforts to ensure the long-term viability of the kingdom that our ancestors first established." Amina replied firmly, "You will not understand that this kingdom is ours, and my father knows what he wrote, his final request will be accomplished although it is hard!" The uncle then stormed into his room, destroying everything in his path. Amina hung a notice on the outer walls of the castle stating that any man who could help her bring all the cedars to the castle will receive a bag full of gold.

An old man knocked on the castle door a few hours later, wanting to speak with Amina, but the soldiers and uncle refused to let him in. Days passed, and this man returned to the castle daily, attempting to reach Amina, until she became aware of what the soldiers were doing to him. She screamed "Stop let the man enter the castle to speak to me, stop now!" The old guy walked inside the palace and told Amina that he has the solution to her dilemma. She took him directly to the castle's highest peak, which she always takes as her refuge and said: "Please, if you have the solution that helps me in making my dad's will reality, do not hesitate and tell me as I can no longer bare these difficulties anymore." The man started, "Amina my lovely queen, the cedar is the tree that symbolizes resilience, history, and strength, to be a queen you should bring all the cedars to the castle, did you realized now what my brother said? " Amina was taken aback by what she heard; she didn't understand why he said "brother." "What did you say!?" Amina exclaimed, irritated. "My girl when I hear that your father, my brother, passed away a few days ago. I knew he would leave you this message stating that he would make his will to be about what you love the most, the cedar tree you go to when you need help," he said, placing his hands on her shoulders. He followed up with, "And he said to me that I should help you in understanding the will immediately; he knew what our little brother, your uncle, would be up to. He needs you to defeat him and become the queen of this kingdom." Amina began to cry and ran towards him and hugged him with a little sense of relief.

Amina understood the message now, and she made it her everything to carry out her father's will. She recognized that bringing the cedar into the castle was only a way for her father to show his desire for her to bring the essence of the cedars, their energy, and what they represent.

Amina went about the environment, inviting everyone to a large gathering in the castle, with resolve in her heart. In addition, with the help of the Jay bird, she could distribute little cedars that they should bring to the castle on the day of the celebration. Amina inaugurated the event by saying: "The cedar resembles resilience and strength, and today I ask of each and every one of you to plant the cedar he has in this castle; the cedar will be a new chapter that empowers all of us after the loss of the king, my father." Everyone praised Amina for her outstanding courage.

The butterflies that aided Amina when she got caught between the rocks appeared at the castle with three other Jays while everyone was planting their cedars. "You are not alone," muttered the butterflies This will be the end of it. The butterflies, with the help of the Jays, started singing a song that had never been heard before. The song went on and on until all the trees in the castle started to grow huge and rooted like they had been there for centuries. Everyone was taken aback by what had happened, until her father's brother approached Amina with the old sage and said, "You made us all proud, and now that you have accomplished what your father desired in his will, we announce that Amina is the new queen."

After a little while, the enraged uncle came out, shocked by what he had seen. The cedar trees that had taken root in the castle shocked him; he had not anticipated that to occur. Simultaneously, he looked at Amina in a way that changed his whole reflection. He witnessed the people's adoration and respect for Amina and the way the cedar essence brought the castle back to life. He concluded that he had been wrong and shouldn't have opposed her. "Wow, not only did you bring the essence of the cedars to the castle, but your wisdom and compassion also united the kingdom," he remarked to her. All the people cheered, and the festival started. At night, Amina went to the cedar she loves the most and said: "Now the castle is filled with cedars like you, but I will never leave you, you are my loyal friend that will always stay a support for me in my journey as a queen." The cedar replied, "Your reign as queen will be as strong as the roots of these cedars and as long-lasting as the mountains that shelter us. Remember that I am with you, supporting and directing your path, with every touch of a breeze through my leaves."

Therefore, Queen Amina's strength was shown by her deep respect for nature and the history she represented. She was recognized not only as a queen but also as a leader who united her people, giving power from their history and Lebanon's long-lasting cedars. With all her determination, hope, and success she holds, Amina resembled a cedar with her brilliant actions.

The End

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Author

Amany Al-Sayyed is an instructor of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon.

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Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*

Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*

Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*

Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*

John Smyth, *Federation Univ. Australia*

Hannah Spector, *Boston Psychoanalytic Society & Institute*

Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*

Inna Stepaniuk, *Simon Fraser University*

Paolo Vittoria, *University of Naples Federico II*