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Chapter 1: Narratives of Mothering

It is time to let mothers have their say. (Susan Rubin Suleiman)

Mothers are an omnipresent force in literature but we do not often hear them speak as mothers. They are, overwhelmingly, objects of the narratives and discourses and of the fears and fantasies of others – of sons, daughters, husbands, lovers, of omniscient narrators, and of religions, ideologies, and politics. Increasingly, though, in contemporary French literature, mothers are becoming narrative subjects in their own right, as authors, as narrators. *Narratives of Mothering: Women's Writing in Contemporary France* engages with this important phenomenon by focusing on the literary narratives of mothers, on mothers' own narratives of mothering, in writing by women in France on the cusp of the new millennium, from the early 1990s through to the first years of the twenty-first century. It explores the themes that women's autobiographical and fictional narratives of mothering address, and the issues they raise, examining a range of genres and styles, images and aesthetics. It asks how far these narratives reproduce dominant patterns and discourses of mothering and in what ways they interrogate, challenge, or start to reinvent mothering. It considers what they tell us about mothers' own desires, fears and anxieties, fantasies and imaginative concepts of mothering, and about the emerging trends and changing experiences of being a mother in contemporary France.

As feminist thinking has convincingly demonstrated over the years, mothering is deeply embedded in our concepts of gender identity, in the construction of individual psyches and subjectivities and in the social organization of gender.¹ Changing practices in family patterns, in gender politics, and in women's political and professional lives, then, issue fundamental challenges to the very concept of mothering, to identity, and to the social order. As elsewhere in the West, the family in France is currently undergoing a process of change, with an increase in the number of single mothers, post-divorce families, homosexual family groupings, etc., and a concomitant decline in conventional nuclear families. The development in reproductive technologies (artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization), the now common-place recourse to contraception and abortion (legalized in France only in 1967 and 1975 respectively), and the opportunities offered by both domestic and international adoption and by surrogate mothering (though the latter has been illegal in France since 1994) have contributed to some of these new family patterns, by offering women unprecedented control of their fertility and over the choice of whether or not to become a mother.

Moreover, European and French legislation in the late 1980s and early 1990s on part-time work, maternity leave and rights, and, arguably, the later French PaCS law covering same-sex couples, are having an impact on women's lives as mothers, in particular on their expectations of how mothering can be lived.² European and national law has indeed done much to change working conditions for women as mothers in terms of equal rights and the work-life balance. Yet, as Roberta Guerrina finds, the effect of such laws is limited, since they tend to endorse rather than challenge conventional representations of women's social role as mothers – as primary care-givers – reinforcing traditional gender hierarchies and divisions of labor.

Guerrina points out, for example, that European Directives on parental leave and part-time workers, although intended to encourage “the creation of a family-friendly workplace,” actually reflect patriarchal concepts of the family based on “the male-breadwinner model.”³ And the PaCs law, which offers legal recognition to same-sex couples in France, makes no provision for those couples with, or planning to have, children. Under French law, the concept of the family remains firmly heterosexual.

The combination of all these foregoing factors means that mothering, as both theory and practice, is currently being contested and interrogated across a number of different fields of enquiry, not only in literary and cultural studies, but in sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis, etc. What impact are the current changes in family patterns having on how mothering is lived and experienced in contemporary France? How do new reproductive technologies call into question the very concept of mothering? In what ways does the gap between expectations raised by recent legislation and the realities of lived experience issue a challenge, not only to legislators, but also to social practitioners and theorists of the family, as well as to feminist interpretations of mothering?

Meanwhile, an exciting body of literature by the generation of women writers who came to the fore of the French literary scene in the 1990s has been attracting the attention of the media, the book-buying public and literary scholars alike. This body of work does not comprise a coherent literary movement but, despite the diversity between the individual authors and works, many of them, unsurprisingly, engage with aspects of women’s lives and bodies, often in quite controversial ways.⁴ A significant number of narratives of mothering can be counted among them, and these offer a privileged insight into how women themselves are expressing and defining mothering in these changing times. My readings in this book are mainly selected from this new

body of literature with the addition of work published in the same period by some longer established writers. I focus exclusively on literary texts where the mother is herself either the first-person narrative subject or, in third-person narratives, the figure whose point of view is paramount. I am not particularly concerned with whether the author of the text is actually a mother herself (although most of them are). Rather, my interest is in the mother's narrative of mothering within the text, whether that text is autobiographical or fictional. Indeed, the blurring of genres in contemporary women's writing, especially with its large-scale turn to an autofictional mode over the last decade or so, makes it increasingly difficult to separate autobiographical and fictional genres. This is not to conflate them, or to understate differences between a more overtly autobiographical text and a resoundingly fictional one. Rather, it is to approach them, as I do here, as a range of different positions on a continuum. The term "narrative" is also used in a general sense to refer to the multifarious textual expression of mothers' voices and points of view rather than in the specific sense of a necessarily ordered, chronological account.

My corpus of mothering narratives is drawn from texts published after 1990 by women living and working in metropolitan France. An inclusion of literature from other francophone areas and territories would have made for a rich but unwieldy study that could not have done justice to the numerous socio-cultural specificities that are brought to bear on the way mothering is lived in those different societies. Extended specialist studies would and should provide such focused analyses.⁵ I was, however, disappointed not to find more mothering narratives that reflected a multi-cultural metropolitan France, but perhaps this development is still to come. The texts of the *beur* [second generation immigrants of North African descent] writers of the early 1990s, for example, include portrayals of mothers, but as objects of narration not as its

subjects. More recently though, mothers *have* begun to appear as narrative subjects in their own right in texts by writers such as Latifa Ben Mansour and Leïla Marouane, women who migrated to France in flight from the Algerian conflicts of the 1990s (see Chapter 4).

Over the last few years, in preparation for this book I have read an enormous number of texts published in the period under review. I have actively sought out relevant examples and I have assiduously followed up suggestions from colleagues and friends, but the sheer volume of works published each year in France means there will always be gaps, and some readers will doubtless identify narratives of mothering that I have missed. However, this book is not intended to be an exhaustive account of texts and themes, which the ever-growing nature of the corpus would quickly render redundant. Rather, it takes the form of a series of in-depth analyses of examples published during the period straddling the millennium, and, by means of a series of chapter-by-chapter case studies, it identifies, and engages with, the principal themes and issues that are emerging.

It may be a truism to say that happiness does not produce a good story, but the most striking finding in my reading for this project has been the number of mothering narratives that express loss of some kind or relate to trauma. This phenomenon is so prevalent that it constitutes the main focus of Part One, “Mothering: Loss, Trauma, Separation,” which includes chapters dealing with the death of a child, the use of birth as a metaphor for trauma, and mother-daughter separation. However, to a greater or lesser extent, every chapter of this book is implicated in this impetus: the chapters in Part Two, “New Stories of Mothering,” which cluster around changing perspectives of the family, also evoke loss, through texts in which mothers and children are separated for a variety of reasons. This situation reflects a more widespread dark side to

contemporary women's writing, and indeed to late twentieth-century literature more generally, which has contributed to the rise of Trauma Studies in the US and the UK and is part of what Mark Seltzer calls "wound culture."⁶

These findings also relate to the phenomenon that Elaine Tuttle Hansen documents in *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood*. Hansen's study is of contemporary fiction in English and does not focus exclusively on narratives by mothers themselves as I do here, but she notes the large number of texts in which mothers are portrayed "without child," whether that be due to voluntary or involuntary loss. Hansen identifies a number of reasons for this trend. First, she acknowledges, "women are writing about loss because they are losing their children, literally and figuratively." On the one hand, material circumstances, such as loss of custody, poverty, which puts both mothers and children at risk, the demands of a career, the death of a child, adoption, abortion, miscarriage, and, on the other hand, the feminist critique of motherhood, Hansen posits, are bringing about a reflection in literature on "the ways in which the mother-child bond is (and perhaps for some should be) currently loosened and endangered, if not severed."⁷ Further, she suggests that this same phenomenon may reflect unconscious processes and fantasies, of separation, ambivalence, and guilt. The chapters that follow here reflect a similar set of factors in the French context. On the one hand, the presence of loss in so many of the narratives indicates that they are produced in response to a specific experience. On the other hand, it also suggests that loss – or the fear or fantasy of loss – is at the very heart of the mothering experience.

The themes selected for coverage in this book are those most insistently raised by the corpus itself, while the twelve texts chosen for close analysis to represent those themes have been selected for the combination of their literary and sociological

interest, as well as, ultimately, reflecting my own preferences and interests. Several of them have won prestigious literary prizes and/or have been translated. As is to be expected, a significant number of themes cross over and most texts address a number of different aspects of mothering. There were many ways in which the texts could have been organized. Thus, although I have not included a chapter specifically on Hansen's "mother-before-child" – that is, accounts of pregnancy, miscarriage, abortion⁸ – Chapter 3 on the death of a child, Chapter 4 on birth, and Chapter 7 on lesbian mothering include such topics. Similarly, there is no chapter solely devoted to new reproductive technologies but this issue is addressed in Chapter 7 (on lesbian mothering), and so on, this strategy serving to ground the topics in specific socio-cultural contexts.

Each chapter rests on the analysis of two texts, which complement each other in their treatment of the topic; this enables a wide range of situations and issues to be explored across the breadth of the work. Moreover, in each chapter, my chosen texts are situated in relation to a larger group on a similar theme and, in order to assist further study, details of this larger corpus are provided in the Notes. This structure facilitates the use of the book as a study aid for those interested in narratives of mothering and/or in women's writing in contemporary France. It is designed to be accessible at all levels, and no prior knowledge of the texts and authors covered is assumed; quotations from the primary texts are given in both French and English. It offers a coherent study of its problematic – the themes and issues raised by mothers as narrative subjects in literature in contemporary France – but readers can equally dip into it for chapters on specific areas of interest or for analyses of particular texts.

Although loss and trauma may be unifying themes to the book, this does not mean that the narratives of mothering discussed here can be reduced to a single

meaning. Nor, in focusing on narratives by mothers *about* mothering, does my study reduce women to motherhood. Rather, as Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet conclude in their *L'histoire des mères du moyen âge à nos jours* [*The History of Mothers from the Middle Ages to Today*], in the epigraph to this book: “Women have never tried to think together about the maternal condition, in an original way, in order to define it for themselves. Perhaps the moment has arrived.”⁹ This study of literary narratives of mothering, in which both the material and the mental worlds are reflected, and reflected upon, offers new insights into the complexity of mothering and of being a mother, and into the plurality of women’s subjectivities as mothers: “For,” as Suzanne Juhasz describes it, “maternal subjectivity demands the negotiation of multiple states of being, or subject positions, that may seem dramatically different from one another and are often experienced as contradictory. A mother is simultaneously, a mother and a daughter, a mother and a (social) woman; a fantasy Mother and an everyday mother; a body and mind originally connected to but now separate from another person.”¹⁰

While some of the situations and issues that are addressed in this book are applicable to women as mothers beyond the immediate French context, the study is, ultimately, grounded in the specific situation of the contemporary French Republic, in a cultural moment in which, as Christine Détrez and Anne Simon put it, “motherhood is amazingly fashionable,”¹¹ and yet in which it continues to be lived in contradictory ways. In a special supplement of *Le Monde* newspaper to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* [*The Second Sex*], Élisabeth Badinter’s diagnosis is optimistic: “For those who choose to be mothers, motherhood is a fundamental part of their life, but their life is no longer reduced to motherhood. ... They have understood that motherhood is a parenthesis ... There is a before and an

after that needs to be organized in the best way possible. From this perspective, women at the end of this century are Beauvoir's heirs, way beyond even her hopes."¹² For Catherine Halpern, though, writing only a few years later in a special issue of the journal *Sciences Humaines* devoted to women, despite changes in work patterns and medical developments, the situation is less rosy, and she argues that little has changed for mothers: "The fact remains that to be a mother today is always and still to be the one in the couple who takes care of the children and the household chores."¹³

My own coming to feminism began with motherhood, and this book is part of that same journey. Overall, then, this is a feminist project for its focus on both women's writing and women's lives. Through analysis of a variety of texts and situations, each chapter of this book engages with the over-arching issue of what it means to mother, drawing on theoretical work appropriate to it. In addition to an engagement with feminist thinking on mothering from a range of disciplines, including psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology, and literary criticism, the rather harrowing dimension that I have identified in these mothering narratives means that theories of mourning and recent developments in Trauma Studies are also relevant.

Chapter 2, which places this study in a theoretical, historical, and literary context closes Part One, the introductory section of the book. Part Two, on loss, opens with an analysis of narratives by bereaved mothers in texts by Laure Adler and Camille Laurens, which are the focus of Chapter 3. Their poignant, thought-provoking accounts raise questions about mourning and about what happens to mothering after a child dies. They also impel an interrogation of the impetus to bring such private and painful experiences into the public, published sphere. Chapter 4 is concerned with a troubling group of texts that link narratives of childbirth to disturbing social issues such as incest and rape. While this is the chapter that is perhaps the most concerned

with the *biological* aspect of mothering (the birth process itself), these narratives, exemplified here by texts by Christine Angot and Leïla Marouane, paradoxically indicate ways in which the *metaphor* of birth is being taken to new horizons in contemporary women's writing. Chapter 5 addresses mother-daughter separation. In the past, the mother-daughter relationship has been portrayed in literature overwhelmingly from the point of view of the daughter, but this chapter focuses on the relationship from the mother's perspective and considers what mothers themselves have to say about mothering daughters. Its analysis of texts by Chantal Chawaf and Marie Ndiaye asks how and to what extent they respond to feminist debates on the dynamic of individuation and identification – a dynamic that appears to be at the root of the often ambivalent nature of this relationship.

The new stories of mothering that make up Part Three begin, in Chapter 6, with a focus on lone mothers from different socio-economic situations, drawing on texts by Geneviève Brisac and Véronique Olmi. The chapter considers how the figures of the good and the bad mother impinge on these narratives of mothering, which both, albeit in different ways, end in the loss of the child. Chapter 7, on lesbian mothering, is perhaps less obviously concerned with loss, although, of course, lesbian mothers are no more immune to loss and separation than are heterosexual mothers. In fact, where custody battles are concerned, lesbian mothers usually come off worse. Moreover, until recently, lesbianism and motherhood have been deemed to be mutually exclusive, and some women have experienced that situation as bereavement (*deuil*).¹⁴ Despite the fact that, since the mid-1990s, same-sex parenting in France has been on the increase, the struggle for its legal and social recognition is still critical. Élisabeth Roudinesco has suggested that homosexual families may offer a model for the family of the future,¹⁵ and Chapter 7 addresses this possibility through its analysis

of narratives of lesbian mothering in texts by Éliane Girard and Myriam Blanc and by means of its engagement with current work on *homoparentalité* [same-sex parenting] and on the implications of new reproductive technologies. The final chapter (Chapter 8) confronts what seems to be a constant issue throughout the history of mothering, that of guilt. In its focus on narratives of mothering in texts by Christine Angot and Marie Darrieussecq, in which mothers refuse to compromise their own needs, the chapter explores the issues at stake in what are arguably narratives of guilt-free mothering.

Any new work on mothers is situated, and must situate itself, in relation to an enormous body of feminist work on mothers and motherhood, from North America, the UK, France and beyond, and it is to this that I now turn, in Chapter 2.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1978).

² See Chapter 7 for discussion of the PaCS law (Pacte civil de solidarité) [Civil Solidarity Pact].

³ Roberta Guerrina, *Mothering the Union: Gender Politics in the EU* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 79, 83.

⁴ For pertinent analyses see Shirley Ann Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing: Women's Visions, Women's Voices, Women's Lives*, Modern French Identities 37 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004); Nathalie Morello and Catherine Rodgers, eds., *Nouvelles écrivaines: nouvelles voix?* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002); Gill Rye, ed., "A New Generation: Sex, Gender and Creativity in Contemporary Women's Writing in French," special issue, *L'Esprit Créateur* 45, no.

1 (Spring 2005); Gill Rye and Carrie Tarr, eds., “Focalizing the Body in Contemporary Women’s Writing and Filmmaking,” special issue, *Nottingham French Studies* 45, no. 3 (Fall 2006); Gill Rye and Michael Worton, eds., *Women’s Writing in Contemporary France: New Writers, New Literatures in the 1990s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

⁵ I have not come across any book length studies that focus exclusively on narratives by mothers in francophone cultures. The work of Mauritian writer, Ananda Devi, would make an interesting study. Her novels *La voile de Draupadi* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1993); *Moi, l’interdite* (Paris: Éditions Dapper, 2000) and *Pagli* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), for example, offer three quite different narratives of mothering (albeit only prospective mothering in the latter) that are firmly grounded in Mauritian culture. For examples of culturally specific studies of mothers and daughters, see Wendy Goolcharan-Kumeta, *My Mother, My Country: Reconstructing the Female Self in Guadeloupean Women’s Writing* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003); Florence Ramond Journey, *Voix/es libres: maternité et identité féminine dans la littérature antillaise* (Birmingham AL: Summa Publications, 2006); and Lori Saint-Martin, *Le nom de la mère: mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin* (Montreal: Éditions Nota Bene, 1999). See also Adalgisa Giorgio, ed., *Writing Mothers and Daughters: Renegotiating the Mother in Western European Narratives by Women* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), for a cross-cultural study of representations of mothers and daughters in a collected volume that comprises specialist treatments of each geographical area.

⁶ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 4; Mark Seltzer, “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere,” *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 3-26.

⁷ Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Mother without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 17, 19.

⁸ Hansen, *Mother without Child*, 201.

⁹ Yvonne Knibiehler and Catherine Fouquet, *L'histoire des mères du moyen-âge à nos jours* (Paris: Montalba, 1980), 363. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from original French texts are my own.

¹⁰ Suzanne Juhasz, "Mother-Writing and the Narrative of Maternal Subjectivity," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 4, no. 4, (2003): 398.

¹¹ Christine Détéz and Anne Simon, *À leur corps défendant: les femmes à l'épreuve du nouvel ordre moral* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), 241.

¹² Élisabeth Badinter, "La revanche des mères," *Le Monde*, April 22, 1999, supplement "L'avenir des femmes: du 'Deuxième Sexe' de Simone de Beauvoir à la parité."

¹³ Catherine Halpern, "Maternité en révolutions," in *Sciences Humaines*, special issue no. 4, "Femmes: corps, sexualité, maternité" (November-December 2005): 84.

¹⁴ See, for example, Christelle Lagattu, "Homoparentalité: d'évolutions en révolution," *La Dixième Muse* 18, January/February, 2006, 27.

¹⁵ Élisabeth Roudinesco, *La famille en désordre* (Paris: Fayard, 2002).