MATERNITÉS ET IDENTITÉS: REPRESENTATIONS OF MOTHERHOOD AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN LITERARY TEXTS OF QUEBEC

BY

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Abstract

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In this dissertation, I analyze the depiction of the mother figure in a selection of Québécois texts spanning from 1916 (*Maria Chapdelaine* by Louis Hémon) to 2008 (*Le Ciel de Bay City* by Catherine Mavrikakis). During the course of the 20th through the start of the 21st centuries, Québécois authors have consistently given importance to mothers in their works, although the mothers often appear to play a minor role. Througout the nearly century-long span of the literature in this study, I observe how the mother evolves from a martyred "guardian of the hearth" who upholds religious and domestic duties to various depictions of maternal (and frequently anti-maternal) women. These myriad "maternités et identités" reflect what is happening within Quebecc either at the time each text was written or when the story takes place. I argue that the literary mother represents not only the domestic sphere in which she plays a central role but also social and political changes within Quebecc. For example, cruel mothers are used as a subversive tool to critique both traditional gender roles and governmental and religious oppression during the *grande noirceur* period. Québécois authors such as Marie-Célie Agnant, Lori Saint-Martin, Ying Chen and Mavrikakis present texts from multicultural perspectives that reveal discrimination and injustices on a global scale. In every text studied here, the authors privilege mother-child relationships significantly more than those between the mother and her spouse. These mother-child relationships reveal the important influence mothers have upon their offspring and the desire children have to cultivate close relationships with their mothers,

regardless of their mothers' degree of affection. The authors included here rarely present the mother's point of view (the protagonists being most frequently the children), and oftentimes she plays what appears to be a minor role in a given text. This lack of centrality, however, belies her compelling significance.

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In memory of Margaret Anne Linz (1952-2010)

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Introduction

La Mère Patrie and Women in the Home/Land

"[Le Quebecc] est tout à la fois pour ce Canada, l'une de ses origines et sa différence." *Le Quebecc: un pays, une culture* (11-12)

"Moi, je ferai comme je voudrai. Moi, j'aurai pas de misère comme sa mère" *Bonheur d'Occasion* (90)

"Vivre ainsi, dans ce pays, comme sa mère avait vécu, et puis mourir et laisser derrière soi un homme chagriné et le souvenir des vertus essentielles de sa race, [Maria] sentait qu'elle serait capable de cela" (Hémon 206). This well-known citation from Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916) signifies Maria's decision to follow in her mother's footsteps by staying, living and toiling in Quebecc. The pluperfect verb tense indicates that her mother's life is already a distant memory, and Hémon emphasizes instead her death. This citation mentions essentialist "virtues" associated with the Québécois "race" as observed by an outsider (Hémon was French). By the end of this novel, it is made overwhelmingly clear to the reader what those virtues are: sacrifice, loyalty, and, especially, hard work. In his novel, Hémon depicts an agrarian, Catholic community. During the 19th century and into the first part of the 20th century, much of Quebec's literature (especially its novels known as *romans du terroir* or *romans de la terre*) depict a society in which a mother's duty was to uphold her family's religious values, and her national duty was to bear as many children as possible in order to build Quebecc's population. The expression *la revanche des berceaux* is attributed to the Jesuit Louis Lalande who used this term in a speech (later published in *L'Action française* in 1918) in which he praised the fecundity of Québécois women and encouraged them to continue their creation of the

large families that would ensure the survival of Quebecc. Women in Quebecc were reminded of the importance of their role as mothers and large families were encouraged as the social ideal.[1]

The representation of mothers and motherhood has evolved in Quebecc's literature since the publication of *Maria Chapdelaine*, and this literary evolution is consistent with Quebecc's changing political and social history. The mother figure in literature reflects not simply the "domestic sphere" in which she plays a central role, but additionally, the events and changes within Quebecc itself. The literary mother often plays a minor role outside of a given novel's principle storyline. This minor role, however, belies her significance. Even when she depicts maternal idealization, such as the self-sacrificing mother in *Maria Chapdelaine*, she depicts an archetype based upon the significant contributions of women. Scholar Louise Forsythe articulates these contributions by explaining that in 19th and early 20th-century Québécois texts: "[Women] were the guardian of the hearth and the faith, the preservers of the French language and its cultural traditions" (45).[2] Even after having held positions traditionally fulfilled by men during World War One, women were encouraged to return to their domestic roles (as in the neighboring United States as well as in France and other European nations). This glorification of women's traditional roles was maintained throughout much of the 20th century.[3] Québécois literature lends itself easily to the study of the representation of mothers and motherhood because so much of it is centered upon the home and family life. This is perhaps in part due to the fact that so many of Quebecc's major authors are women; female authors such as Gabrielle Roy, Marie-Claire Blais, and Anne Hébert dominate Quebecc's literary canon.[4] At an international colloquium on women and writing in 1975, author and theorist Nicole Brossard mused on the sheer presence of women writers in Quebecc: "Il faudra bien s'expliquer une bonne fois comment il se fait que les femmes aient joué un rôle si important dans notre littérature. [. . .]

Comment il se fait que leurs œuvres aient su toucher une vaste partie du public québécois?"[5] Other male authors often feature gynocentric texts; the literary universes of Michel Tremblay, Quebecc's best-known playwright, for example, are almost always women-centered. Whether the author is male or female, and whether or not the mother figure plays a significant role in a given text, the mother's status as the central unit of the home makes her compelling. The point of view of the mother, however, is rarely privileged. Nearly every author included in my study puts the child's perspective at the forefront of his or her text.

I contribute to recent studies done on the portrayal of women in Québécois literature by focusing specifically on the mother and by considering the historical and political contexts of each literary work studied here. Mother figures in literary texts beginning during the post-World War Two period become increasingly compelling, assertive, but also myriad; they differ from earlier literary texts in which the character of the mother is restricted and often of little significance to the story itself. Rather, the father is more frequently the focus, particularly in the *romans du terroir*. Mary Jean Green, who has published much on Québécois women's writing, notes that within these texts, "the central place was reserved for the man, the father, the patriarch. [. . .] The woman does not play an active role, and the mother is almost completely effaced" (Green "The Past Our Mother" 65). Beginning in the latter part of the 20th century, however, most notably with the publication of Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion* (1946), literary mothers are not simply more active, but in fact, they are often the most engaging and interesting characters in a given text. This evolution of the mother character coincides with a less repressed society in which the role of women is no longer restricted to the "guardian of the hearth." In fact, the majority of mothers featured in the texts I study contrast the traditional maternal figures of the *romans du terroir* era, depicting indifferent, resentful or even abusive mothers. The

mother's relationship with other family members frequently offers the most interest for readers, especially when she deviates from her normative maternal role. I argue in fact that anti-maternal (cruel) mothers serve as subversive tools to critique the oppression of women. During the second half of the 20th century, Québécois authors depict an increasingly varied portrayal of motherhood, whether through cruel mothers (for example in Marie-Claire Blais's *La Belle Bête* (1959), Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* (1950) or Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* (1991)), female characters who regard motherhood as incompatible with happiness and success (such as Roy's character Florentine in *Bonheur d'Occasion* as well as France Théoret's protagonists spanning her body of works from the 1970s through the 2000s), and mothers who are indifferent toward or quietly resentful of their children (such as Emma's mother in Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma* (2001) and the mother in Catherine Mavrikakis's *Le Ciel de Bay City* (2008)).

Along with the varied depictions of motherhood and women in Québécois literature comes increasingly imaginative and varied language choices. The unique linguistic status of Quebecc, including its particular variation of French and the influence of North American English as well as of its immigrants from varying linguistic backgrounds, allows for an exceptional amount of creativity in terms of language use. Many of the Québécois authors studied here exemplify this original linguistic expression with the use of joual (the spoken variation of French especially associated with working-class populations of the Montreal area), with code-switching (between French and English), or with a non-sexist use of (the inherently sexist) French language (particularly associated with feminist writers such as France Théoret).[6] Joseph Melançon, in his article on "The Writing of Difference in Quebecc," adds that literature is always national, and that language is the determining factor of a literature's nationality; the case of Quebecc is therefore problematic because "its literature could not be termed national [. . .]

since Quebecc did not conform to the bourgeois definition of a nation" (22).[7] While Quebecc as a province does not meet the political definition of "nationhood," Melançon proposes that one solution to Quebecc's unique linguistic and national identity is the use of joual, as used for example in Michel Tremblay's play *Les Belles-sœurs* (1968).[8] The choice of marking language variation as specifically Québécois removes ambiguity and asserts the characters' geographical and socio-economic identity. One needs only to glance at a single page of *Les Belles-sœurs* to be struck by its difference in opposition to Québécois texts that do not deviate from "standard" French (*le français de France*). In the case of *Maria Chapdelaine*, Hémon marks his characters' linguistic idiosyncrasies particular to Quebecc with quotation marks. For example: "—Il y a 'icitte' deux hommes qui ont de l'argent pour acheter les pelleteries" (4). These quotation marks emphasize Hémon's own outsider status and designate specifically Québécois expressions like "sa mère" (as opposed to "ma mère") as quaint, colorful, or even as less valid than their "standard" equivalents.

The conservation of the French language, along with the cultural and religious traditions of Quebecc, was a duty associated with mothers and depicted by the mother figure of the *romans du terroir*. In her documentation of Quebecc's sociological and cultural history *Le Quebecc: un pays, une culture*, Françoise Tétu de Labsade articulates the paradoxical status of women in Quebecc that began in the 19th century but continued well into the 20th: "Il s'était institué au XIXe siècle une force matriarcale qui n'empêchait toutefois pas les femmes d'être cantonnées dans les rôles traditionnels d'épouse porteuse d'enfants et de mère nourricière, et d'avoir un statut subalterne aux yeux du Code civil" (90). The limitations of this "matriarchal" power, confined to the home and family, are hardly particular to Quebecc. Patricia Smart, in her introduction to *Écrire dans la maison du père*, a study devoted to the history of women's writing

in Quebecc, agrees and emphasizes the importance of the Catholic religion's influence upon gendered discourse of power in Quebecc: "On a souvent appellé la société traditionelle canadienne-française un 'matriacart' [. . .]. En réalité, cependant, cette figure maternelle solitaire et puissante était une construction idéologique créée par une hiérarchie mâle rattachée à l'Église catholique et modelée sur la France pré-révolutionnaire: hiérarchie dans laquelle le pouvoir se transmettait en lignée directe de Dieu le Père au Roi de France au père de famille, et ensuite au fils aîné" (30). This hierarchy ignores women's roles and responsibilities; even the term "God the Father" negates the idea of a "matriarchal power." Despite this matriarchal myth, throughout the 20th century, women asserted themselves into the central part of Quebecc's cultural world while gaining increasing political power (the right to vote in 1940, the right to participate in juries for criminal cases in 1971, etc.).

Women's influence in Quebecc's cultural domain is particularly evident in literature, much of which focuses on the home and on family dynamics, including those between mothers and children. In several of the works studied here, the authors provide perspectives of women both as mothers themselves and as daughters (these multi-generational comparisons are especially significant in Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion*, Jacob's *L'Obéissance* and Mavrikakis's *Le Ciel de Bay City*). In her influential psychoanalytical study, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow argues that the mother-daughter dynamic, both in literature and in life, is of particular interest because women, unlike men, experience life relationally; the mother sees her daughter as an extension of herself. Chodorow claims that mothers' relationships with their daughters will invariably be more significant than those with their sons. Although I disagree with Chodorow's essentialist notions of gender, mother-daughter relationships do create the intrigue of much of Quebecc's literature.[9] I would add, however, that mother-son relationships

are not insignificant and in fact are of major importance in texts such as Blais's *La Belle Bête*, Hébert's *Le Torrent* and Tremblay's *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte* (1978). Nancy Chodorow is just one American theorist whose work has influenced some authors in Quebecc. In *Traditionalism, Nationalism, Feminism: Women Writers of Quebecc*, Paula Lewis argues that Québécois authors have the advantage of being familiar with and influenced by both French and American writers: "Women writers on the current Quebecc literary scene, for example, have benefited from both the American and French women's movements, theories, and literature. They are as familiar with Adrienne Rich and Mary Daly as they are with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva" (4). Among these international feminist theorists mentioned, two created texts that have become canonical essays regarding motherhood. Both Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) and Julia Kristeva's essay "Stabat Mater," (1977) influenced some Québécois writers of the 1970s and 1980s.[10] [11] Both authors use their own personal experiences as mothers to give authoritative evidence of their analyses of motherhood. Rich, inspired by her own ambivalent feelings toward her personal experiences as a mother, begins her book with excerpts from her own personal journals in which she famously asserts, "My children cause me the most exquisite suffering of which I have any experience" (21). This sentence defies the oversimplified and idealized notion of unconditional maternal love; Rich audaciously confirms a more complicated relationship with her children. Yet "women, above all mothers, have been supposed to love that way" (23). These personal reflections introduce a scholarly examination of the medical and sociological history, which Rich considers the patriarchal institution, of motherhood. Rich investigates how mothering has limited women's experiences throughout history and in different countries. She argues that women should not be defined solely by their status as mothers: "Motherhood, in the sense of an

intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child, or children, is *one part* of female process; it is not an identity for all time" (37 emphasis in original). Rich claims that women are expected to become mothers, but the embodiment of motherhood often effaces all other aspects of women's identities.

In her essay, Kristeva creates a *mise en abyme*, in which she presents two pieces of writing, split down the middle of the page as though the primary article (on the right) itself has given birth to a poetic text (on the left) examining Kristeva's own childbirth experience. Just as Rich relies on her own experiences for authoritative purposes, Kristeva's reading of maternity, which seeks a rupture from the traditional Christian interpretation of the mother, is interrupted by personal narratives of her own experiences as a mother.[12] Kristeva often focuses on the body, reflecting upon the physical aspects of motherhood:

> Odeur de lait, verdure en rosée, acide et claire, rappel de vent, de l'air des algues (comme si un corps vivait sans déchet) : elle glisse sous ma peau, ne reste pas à la bouche ni au nez mais caresse les veines, décolle l'épiderme des os, m'enfle comme un ballon d'ozone, et je plane les pieds bien calés sur terre pour le porter, sûre, stable, indéracinable, pendant qu'il danse dans mon cou, flotte avec mes chevuex, cherche à droite à gauche une épaule douce, slips on the brest [*sic*], swingles, silver vivid blossom of my belly, et s'envole enfin sur mon nombril dans son rêve porté par mes mains. Mon fils. (235)

Striking in this passage is the sensual embodiment of mother and child – the odor of milk is not limited to her mouth and nose but travels throughout her body, on which her son finally finds comfort at her navel; this is the site, of course, of his origin. The phrase "son rêve porté par mes mains" reasserts Kristeva's (the mother's) own important role in her son's life, her hands literally

bringing her son's dreams (or at the very least aiding his sleep), but Kristeva's use of code-switching suggests a blurred identity. Where does her body end and her son's begin? This question preoccupies both Kristeva and Rich. Kristeva asserts, "Mon corps n'est plus à moi, il se tord, souffre, saigne, s'enrhume, met ses dents, bave, tousse, se couvre de boutons et rit. Pourtant, quand sa joie à lui, mon enfant, revient, son sourire ne me lave que les yeux" (230-1). While the mother experiences the pain of each of her child's sufferings, she does not feel his joy: "On n'accouche pas dans la douleur, on accouche la douleur" (231). Like Kristeva, Rich also notes the inevitable identification with her children, focusing especially on the painful aspects: "To suffer with and for and against a child – maternally, egotistically, neurotically [. . .] always, everywhere, in body and soul with that child – because the child is a piece of oneself" (22). Rich describes both the joy and pain that comes with having children, while describing her own depression following the birth of her own children.[13] The pain and misery that accompanies motherhood, in both of these texts, contrast the pervasive idealized maternal images that convey the expectation that motherhood comes easily and naturally for women. Both Rich and Kristeva describe motherhood as suffering, and in fact, assert that motherhood itself depends upon a woman's suffering. Womanhood, in much of literature, and as noted by both Rich and Kristeva in their theoretical works, is synonymous with motherhood. Rich argues that motherhood as an institution maintains women's subjugated position.

Quebecc's gendered nationalist discourse also reveals the inequitable roles of men and women. While this gendered discourse is not unique to Quebecc, much of Quebecc's nationalist discourse has had the tradition of additionally presenting the province and its relationship to the rest of Canada in familial terms. The oppression of the Québécois people has often been described as the oppression of a female family member, specifically of either a "femme battue"

or a "petite sœur" wanting more autonomy. In her analysis of nationalist discourse in Quebecc, *L'Amère patrie* (2001), Diane Lamoureux observes that the "gender" of Quebecc changes according to its depiction: "L'oppression met le Quebecc en posture féminine, celle de la femme battue qui a besoin du divorce. L'affirmation est, par contre, une figure virile" (124). Additionally, when Quebecc is depicted as an oppressed woman, the rest of Canada is presented as its masculine, familial counterpart.

This metaphor explains the interpretation of Tremblay's play *Hosanna* (1973), which critics often viewed as symbolic of Quebecc's national identity. The two characters in the play have been said to represent Quebecc and the rest of Canada, due to their respective femininity and masculinity. Hosanna, a transvestite, has been humiliated and shunned – a "femme battue." She is presented in opposition to the much more masculine Cuirette – the representation of anglophone Canada. Tremblay has both supported and denied this interpretation, saying:

> Hosanna is a man who always wanted to be a woman. This woman always wanted to be Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra. In other words this Québécois always wanted to be a woman who always wanted to be an English actress in an American movie about an Egyptian myth shot in Spain. In a way, this is a typically Québécois problem. For the past 300 years we were not taught that we were a people, so we were dreaming about being somebody else instead of ourselves. So Hosanna is a political play (Tremblay quoted in Gilbert 263).

Tremblay has apologized for supporting this analysis which ignores the play's homosexual context, saying in an interview with Luc Boulanger: "[J]'ai commis une grave erreur en parlant du côté 'politique' de la pièce au journaliste du New York Times. Je lui avais expliqué qu'Hosanna représentait le Quebecc et son chum, Cuirette, le Canada. *Or, le sujet de la pièce est*

d'abord l'identité sexuelle et non la politique" (69 my emphasis). The interactions between Tremblay's two characters eventually reveal more complicated gender identities. Hosanna is not simply "a man who always wanted to be a woman." Despite his effeminate behavior and appearance, Hosanna is actually the breadwinner who supports Cuirette financially: "[Ç]a fait quatre ans que tu me sers de femme de ménage! Comprends-tu ça? Ça fait quatre ans qu'on est ensemble, pis ça fait quatre ans que c'est moé qui mène! C'est moé qui travaille, c'est moé qui te fait vivre, pis c'est toé qui lave les planchers, qui lave la vaisselle, pis qui fait le spéghatti!" (46).[14] Additionally, the feminine suffix of the name Cuirette (a homophone of the English word "queer") reinforces his femininity. During these revelations, the protagonists are causing what Judith Butler terms "gender trouble," by blurring their identities that at first seem fixed. Butler reminds us: "In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency" (175). At the beginning of the play, the audience sees a presentation of a masculine character and a feminine character and expects to see both imitate traditional gender dynamics (despite the fact that both are biologically male). By the play's end, however, the two characters appear equal in terms of gender and power. If we interpret *Hosanna* as a metaphor for the status of Quebecc within Canada, then Tremblay appears to suggest that Quebecc as a province has strength that, although not apparent at a first look, is equal to that of anglophone Canada.

This interpretation of Tremblay's play as an affirmation of the importance of Quebecc is logical due to its publication and production at the end of the *Révolution Tranquille*. Besides the secularization, social and economical reforms associated with this time period (the 1960s), there was also a surge in Quebecc's nationalist movement. The creation of the *Parti Québécois* (led by René Lévesque) in 1967 and the more radical *Front de libération du Quebecc* in 1968 led to

an active quest for independence. French President Charles de Gaulle's proclamation of "Vive le Quebecc libre!" during a 1967 visit to Montreal was believed by some to give credibility to the rising nationalist movement but also prompted a political uproar.[15] The desire to maintain the French language within Quebecc was an important aspect of the nationalist movement. Written by Gilles Richer et Marc Gélinas, the song "Mommy, Daddy" (1971) is associated with this movement. The lyrics express the desire of an English-speaking child to learn about his or her francophone roots in a Quebecc in which French has ceased to exist. Singer and sovereigntist activist Pauline Julien made popular a slight variation of the original version (recorded on her 1974 album *L'Automne Show*). In Julien's version, "Daddy," is left out and the voice beseeches only "Mommy, Mommy" to teach her of her French roots:

> Mommy, Mommy, I love you dearly
>
> Please tell me once again that beautiful story
>
> Un jour, ils partirent de France
>
> Bâtir ici quelques villages, une ville, un pays
>
> Mommy, Mommy, how come we lost the game?
>
> Oh Mommy, Mommy, are you the one to blame?[16]

This version acknowledges the influence of women in the preservation and protection of language, but it also puts the blame entirely on "Mommy."

Despite the large number of successful women writers in Quebecc, the specifically nationalist texts of 1960s and 1970s Quebecc are predominantly male-centered both in authorship and content. In her article on "Jacques Godbout and the Quebecc writer," Mary Jean Green suggests the exclusion of women authors from the body of Quebecc's political (nationalist) texts: "Given the canonical status of Gabrielle Roy and Germaine Guèvremont in

the last decades of *la grande noirceur*, it is somewhat surprising that in the new, supposedly liberal era of the *Révolution tranquille* women writers continue to be insidiously excluded from the dominant literary discourse" (7-8). The authors most associated with having created nationalist literary texts, including Hubert Aquin (*Prochain épisode*, 1965), Gaston Miron (*L'homme rapaillé*, 1970), and Jacques Godbout (*Salut Galarneau!*, 1967) among others, create narrators and protagonists who ignore the influence of women or limit women's roles. Green criticizes both the paradox of an era that at once celebrated progressive change yet was "impervious to the participation of women as gendered subjects" (7) and Godbout specifically for the misogynist sentiments in his work. It is true that Godbout falls prey to the tropes of gendered nationalist discourse (as analyzed by Lamoureux). In his 1971 essay, "Écrire," Godbout envisions only male writers, who must build up the nation of Quebecc (who is female, and moreover, not a woman but a girl (*fille*)) by sleeping with her: "Tous les écrivains du Quebecc couchent avec la même fille qui s'appelle Nation. Mais cette fille n'a pas de maison. C'est pourquoi on dira de celui qui veut devenir écrivain qu'il est un pionnier: comme les pionniers il lui faudra simultanément construire la maison et baiser la fille (145).[17] This trope recalls literary psychohistorian Harold Bloom's Freudian interpretation of the poetic process as a sexual encounter between a (always male) author and his female muse.[18] While Godbout and other male revolutionary authors do rely upon gendered nationalist discourse that dismisses or ignores women's participation, Godbout does acknowledge the contributions of some female writers, such as Marie-Claire Blais and Michèle Lalonde, the latter of whom is perhaps the most active nationalist woman writer of this period. Smart observes, however, that Lalonde's "feminine persona" from her earlier poetic works seems to disappear in overtly political works like "Speak White" (1968).

"Speak White" stands apart from other nationalist texts because it equates the people of Quebecc to other colonized groups around the world and recognizes the oppression of all colonized people – particularly those in the francophone world. Lalonde's use of code-switching puts into question the hierarchy of language use: "speak white comme à Wall Street/ white comme à Watts/ be civilized" (3).[19] Lalonde associates the use of an imperialist language (French or English) with economic greed and the oppression of others. Lalonde also notes the absurdity of the expectation of colonized people to accept and use unquestioningly a language (not to mention a government and a culture) imposed upon them. Furthermore, she ironically refers to formerly colonized countries whose citizens' language(s) have never resembled the standard variation of French associated with France: "parlez un français pur et atrocement blanc/ comme au Viêt-Nam au Congo" (4). Lalonde's poem ends with a reminder that "nous ne sommes pas seuls" (5), affirming that the people of Quebecc hold solidarity with all marginalized groups of people. Lalonde also specifically evokes the oppression of African Americans by comparing the Civil Rights movement to the Algerian War for Independence: "nous savons que liberté est un mot nègre/ comme la misère est nègre/ et comme le sang se mêle à la poussière des rues d'Alger ou de Little Rock" (5). In these stanzas, Lalonde compares the situation of the Québécois people to that of African Americans.

Pierre Vallière's bombastic *Nègres blancs d'Amérique* (1971) also equates (white) Québécois people to African-Americans within both the title and content of his autobiographical manifesto. As a leading member of the *Front de libération du Quebecc*, Vallières protests the unjust condition of the Québécois people. Vallières seems to purposefully attempt to include women in his call to action: "Notre lutte fait partie de la longue marche des hommes *et des femmes* vers la libération de l'exploitation des uns par les autres" (442 my emphasis). The

inclusivity of this statement is somewhat negated afterwards by his call to specific men: "Arthur, Louis, Jules, Ernest? Debout, *les gars*, et *tous* ensemble: au travail!" (442 my emphasis). Vallières's well-meaning attempt to include women is overshadowed by his address of specific men, but this is consistent with the bigger-picture gendered discourse of nationalism in which women's roles were not clearly articulated. Despite these inconsistencies, Vallières's text is an unlikely example of a work that demonstrates the importance of a woman, notably his mother, in forming his own political awakening.

Vallières's contrasts his parents. While he observes that his father was interested in current affairs and other people, his mother chose isolation:

> Mon père pouvait se libérer à l'usine, avec ses camarades de travail. [. . .] Mais ma mère, elle, ne sortait jamais. [. . .] On aurait dit qu'elle ne vivait que pour calculer les revenus et les dépenses, cirer les planchers, faire la cuisine. [. . .] Rien ne la passionnait. Rien ne l'attirait . . . que son devoir d'État: c'est-à-dire, dans son esprit, l'obligation de veiller continuellement à ce qu'aucun accident ne survienne (147).

Vallières seems to understand his mother's lack of engagement, but he nevertheless blames his mother for preventing his father from becoming more actively engaged politically and socially ("il y avait toujours le NON de ma mère"(149 emphasis in original)). Vallières expresses repeatedly the desire that his mother be a different sort of person; that she would show interest in the outside world, be a bit more courageous, and resist her condition instead of accepting it: "Comme j'aurais voulu que ma mère fut une femme capable d'un certain courage et d'un espoir au moins semblable à celui de mon père" (149). By having the same expectations of both parents, Vallières ignores the "devoir d'état" that sanctioned different roles for men and women.

In her article "'Mère, je vous haïs!' Quebecc Nationalism and the Legacy of the Family Paradigm in Pierre Vallières's *Nègres blancs d'Amérique*," Katherine Roberts observes that while Vallières does not acknowledge the contribution of his mother's (domestic) work, "Vallières' initial description of his mother hints at the complexity and model operative in 1960s Quebecc that encouraged passivity and resignation in women" (297).[20] Although Vallières's own political awakening stems out of frustration with his mother, and although he blames his mother's preoccupation with domestic concerns as barring his father from engaging politically, he also recognizes (to an extent) the fact that his mother was simply doing what was expected of her. Although Vallières notes that perceived duty causes his mother to block his father's desires as well as to prevent her own agency, he also observes that her religious duties (attend church daily and pray) were performed despite her scorn for "la MÈRE des mères, l'Église" (172 emphasis in original). Because his primary concern with his mother is that she stands in the way of his father realizing his dreams, this terminology suggests that the church is an even bigger obstacle to the Québécois people as a whole. Vallières goes so far to describe his mother's feelings as hatred for the Catholic church, but her sense of duty drives her to maintain the façade of a religious woman.

Nègres blancs d'Amérique shows how even a fundamentally politically text can reveal a clear connection between family life (the private "feminine" sphere) and its influence on the political (public, "masculine" sphere) as well as the importance of the relationship between a mother and her child. Vallières devotes his central chapter in what is for all intents and purposes a political manifesto to reflect upon his upbringing and, specifically, the behavior of his parents. His own political drive can be interpreted as being formed due to a personal reaction to his

mother's lack of engagement and a specific motivation to behave differently than both of his parents.

Vallières cites Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion* as a genuine depiction of *la misère* of the Québécois people; he then qualifies his praise by emphasizing that her novel is more of a character study than a critical examination of society. Again, books by many of Quebecc's well-known female authors, such as Gabrielle Roy, tend not to be overtly political, although they often include political perspectives by certain characters or criticisms of certain political or cultural institutions. *Bonheur d'Occasion* is one of Quebecc's best-known and far-reaching works (Gabrielle Roy obtained international recognition after the publication of the English translation, *The Tin Flute*, was selected as the Literary Guild of America book of the month in 1947).[21] In *Écrire dans la maison du père*, Smart observes that *Bonheur d'Occasion* was the first major novel associated with Quebecc with both a mother figure who does not die and a genuine mother-daughter relationship (a relationship in which the mother and daughter communicate and the dynamics of which the author reflects upon).

Several important texts complement Smart's *Écrire dans la maison du père* (a study of Quebecc's female authors in general) by focusing specifically on the changing role of women in literary texts of Quebecc. Several anthologies devoted to women's writing in Quebecc and/or the francophone world include essays that focus on mothers in literature. Examples include *Women by Women: The Treatment of Female Characters by Women Writers of Quebecc Since 1980* (1997, edited by Roseanna Dufault), *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers* (1996, edited by Mary Jean Green), and *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s* (2001, edited by Paula Gilbert and Roseanna Dufault). These anthologies, all devoted specifically to women authors, include only post-*Révolution Tranquille* texts among

their essays treating Quebecc's literature. Karen Gould has written much on women writers of Quebecc; her article, ""Refiguring the Mother: Quebecc Women Writers in the 80s" provides a history of the mother figure in Québécois literature and focuses mainly on the group of feminist female authors of the 1970s and 1980s who avoid the character of the mother in their own works, preferring that of the liberated daughter who rejects motherhood as an option for her own life. Théoret's female protagonists, for example, consciously avoid marriage and children in order to pursue her own professional aspirations; they also maintain an estranged relationship with their own mothers. Théoret and other feminist writers (such as Nicole Brossard) use nontraditional *écriture feminine,* which Louise Forsythe offers as a concrete example of how these authors reject both traditional writing and traditional roles for women in her article on "The Radical Transformation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in Some Women Writers of Quebecc."[22] Scholar and Québécois author Lori Saint-Martin (whose short story "Pur Polyester" I discuss in this dissertation) examines mother-daughter relationships in *Le Nom de la mère: mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au feminin* (1999).

In my dissertation, I analyze literary texts that span the 20th and early 21st centuries, although the bulk of the works studied here are of the post-*Révolution Tranquille* era. Earlier works include *Maria Chapdelaine* (Louis Hémon, 1916), which I believe serves as a great model of what the idealization of motherhood in early 20th-century *romans du terroir* looks like, as well as an important mother-daughter dynamic; *Bonheur d'Occasion* (Gabrielle Roy, 1946), which also provides an important mother-daughter relationship, as well as reflections on motherhood and gender roles; finally *Le Torrent* (Anne Hébert, 1950) and *La Belle Bête* (Marie-Claire Blais, 1959), both of which depict cruel, and in the case of Hébert's text, physically abusive mothers. These two texts are complemented by Yves Thériault's *Le Drame d'Aurore* (1952) (published

under the pseudonym Benoît Tessier) regarding the legendary child abuse case of Aurore Gagnon. Besides Thériault's dramatization of this *fait divers*, only two texts included in this dissertation are authored by men: *Maria Chapdelaine* and *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte* (Michel Tremblay, 1978). The chapters of this dissertation, with the exception of the first chapter, are arranged chronologically, as the themes that emerge regarding trends of motherhood in literature are set in specific eras. Some chapters (chapters one, two and five) link texts thematically, while others (chapters three, four and six) are devoted to sole authors or even sole texts. It is my hope that this dissertation shows how the evolving mother figure in literary texts reveals changes within Quebecc; I believe that the depiction of life within the home is revelatory of social and political transitions. The mother, as the guardian of tradition, religion, language, and culture, holds an important piece of the family structure. Whether she lives up to all that is expected of her or rejects this role entirely impacts the family dynamics but also the significance of the literary work itself, regardless of her status as a major or minor character. Putting each work in a historical context provides important insight to each author's formation of the mother character.

Interestingly (and unintentionally) the mother is not the central protagonist in any of the literary texts studied in my thesis, with the exception perhaps of Tremblay's *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte* (and even then she has much competition with the other numerous characters). At times, in fact, the mother is of minor importance. In Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965), she is silent and obedient to an extreme degree. In most of the texts included here, the narrative voice is that of the child who reflects upon his or her relationship with the mother, even when the protagonist is a young adult, as in the case of Blais's *La Belle Bête*, Théoret's *Laurence* (1996) and Ying Chen's *L'Ingratitude* (1995). Several studies done in

recent years on the representation of the mother in Québécois literature have focused primarily on the mother-daughter relationship. However, recent articles have also been written on the depiction of father-daughter dynamics.[23] Mother-son relationships are particularly significant in, for example, *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte* and Hébert's *Le Torrent*. It is my opinion that the relationships between mothers and children are often more compelling than those between mothers and their spouses. The children in nearly every text studied here spends much (at times nearly all) of their energy focusing on their mother and desiring their mother's love, even when the mother is cruel, abusive or indifferent (this desire is particularly strong for Emma in Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, for Isabelle-Marie in Blais's *La Belle Bête* and for Yan-Zi in Chen's *L'Ingratitude*).

My first chapter, "*Pour Gagner Sa Vie*: Martyred Mothers and Daughters' Choices" looks at four texts that span the 20th century: Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916), Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion*, (1945), Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965) and Lori Saint-Martin's short story, "Pur Polyester" (1999). I look specifically at how the daughters view their mothers, particularly in terms of labor. Each author emphasizes the hard work and sacrifices made by the mother to provide for her family. The daughters either acknowledge and appreciate her mother's devotion to the well-being of their family (as in the works by Hémon and Saint-Martin) or they regard their mother with indifference or disdain (as in the works by Roy and Blais). In all four texts, however, each daughter consciously chooses, or at least considers choosing, a professional path that differs from that of her mother. Each author emphasizes *la misère* of working class life in his or her text whether it is set in early 20th-century rural Quebecc (*Maria Chapdelaine*, *Une Saison dans la vie*

d'Emmanuel), in mid-20th-century Montreal (*Bonheur d'Occasion*), or contemporary Quebecc as experienced by a recently immigrated family ("Pur Polyester").

My second chapter looks at two novels both written during the *grande noirceur* period preceding the *Révolution Tranquille* and both featuring cruel mothers:"Cruel Mothers During the *Grande Noirceur*: *La Belle Bête* by Marie-Claire Blais, *Le Torren*t by Anne Hébert, and the Legend of Aurore Gagnon." In opposition to theidealized "guardian of the hearth" archetype presented in works such as *Maria Chapdelaine* discussed in the previous chapter, the mother figure in the novels by Blais and Hébert is cruel toward her children. I also discuss the tale of Aurore Gagnon. This event, a true story of the abuse of a child by her stepmother, has become a legend within Quebecc, and sparked the creation of several plays, novels, and films, including a film and novel both based upon the legend and released in 1952. In their works, both Blais and Hébert displace traditional gender roles and family dynamics. Their cruel mothers serve to depict a disturbing vision of pre-*Révolution Tranquille* Quebecc.

Chapter three, "*Les Grossesses* of Michel Tremblay's *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte*," takes an original and in-depth look at Tremblay's novel in which nearly every female character is pregnant (and due to give birth at nearly identical times). Set during World War Two, but written and published in the late 1970s, Tremblay exposes working-class family life while accusing Quebecc's educational system andthe Catholic church of manipulating both men and women into believing that pregnancy is shameful but that, paradoxically, being a mother is an essential role for (married, young, healthy) women. Tremblay presents a myriad of interpersonal relationships that provoke questions regarding marriage, pregnancy, and parenting.

In chapter four, entitled "France Théoret's (Wo)Manipulation of Language," I look at the works of Théoret, primarily known as a feminist author who contributed to Quebecc's body of

feminist literary and theoretical works during the 1970s and 1980s.[24] In addition to using creative syntax and inventing feminine forms of French nouns that technically only exist in the masculine form, this group of authors also reclaims words that traditionally have been used pejoratively toward women. Théoret's essays and works of fiction broach topics such as the use of language by women, the need to contest the societal restrictions placed on women, and what it means to be writing from the point of view of someone who is both Québécois and a woman. This latter point especially remains a constant preoccupation for the narrators in Théoret's creative works. Although her language use has become increasingly standardized in her later works, these feminist themes (particularly the adamant rejection of motherhood by her female protagonists) remain consistent throughout the body of Théoret's *œuvre.*

Chapter five, entitled "Infanticides at the Turn of the 21st Century" serves as a parallel to chapter two. I analyze *L'Obéissance* (1991) by Suzanne Jacob, *L'Ingratitude* (1992) by Ying Chen, and *Le Livre d'Emma* by Marie-Célie Agnant (2001). As opposed to the novels studied in chapter two, which feature children who kill their cruel mothers, in each of these novels the mother causes the death of her daughter. These three authors depict daughters who are obsessed with their mothers and love them despite their cruelty. By providing background information about their mothers' own upbringing and unhappy or unsatisfying romantic relationships, each author evokes sympathy for their mother character, despite her crime. Each infanticide goes beyond the scope of private, family life to critique oppression on a global scale.

My final chapter, entitled "Welcome to My Nightmare: Transgenerational and Transnational Family Secrets in *Le Ciel de Bay City* by Catherine Mavrikakis," explores Mavrikakis's novel (published in 2008) that takes place in Michigan in the 1970s. Mavrikakis's adolescent protagonist, Amy, resents both her mother's lack of affection and her family's refusal

to acknowledge their French and Jewish heritage. Mavrikakis depicts two generations of mother-daughter relationships that, despite their contrasting dynamics, cannot avoid the collective memory of past traumas. In this chapter, I also consider Mavrikakis's epistolary book, *Ventriloquies* (2003), which is a meditation upon various aspects of motherhood, including mother-daughter relationships, miscarriages, abortion, pregnancy and parenting. In both works, Mavrikakis calls for honest acknowledgement of family matters and histories that often go unspoken.

In this dissertation, I analyze how depictions of mothers in Québécois literature reflect a shifting social and cultural reality. It is my hope that my selection of texts by both well-known and lesser-known authors reveal a compelling literary survey that might appeal even to those unfamiliar with Quebecc's literature. It is my hope as well that this dissertation will contribute to the body of scholarly works devoted to the analysis and appreciation of francophone literature in general and Québécois literature in particular. An examination of the historical context of each literary work (both when it was written and when the story takes place), results in a richer analysis than would be accomplished by considering solely the discursive representation of mothers. Women's roles and family dynamics are of course issues that go far past the borders of Quebecc, but I believe that Quebecc is particularly rich in its scope of female characters, and especially of its mother characters. Whether martyred or cruel, caring or indifferent, the mothers in Québécois literature reflect both what is happening within the home and what is happening beyond the domestic sphere.

Chapter One

Pour Gagner Sa Vie:

Martyred Mothers and Daughters' Choices

In this chapter, I will examine four Québécois texts that span the 20th century (from 1916 to 1999) in which the mothers fulfill their normative, and often sacrificial, duties expected from women. The daughters' decisions, primarily regarding whether or not to emulate their mothers, represent an evolution of the roles of women in Quebecc. In Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Maria actively chooses to live and work as her mother lived even though she has the opportunity for a potentially easier life in the United States. Her respect and admiration for her mother, as well as her love of the land of Quebecc, help to make her decision. On the other hand, in Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion* (1945), Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965), and Lori Saint-Martin's short story, "Pur Polyester" (1999), the daughters seek to live and work in ways that differ from their mothers in order to avoid the excessive hardships they have witnessed growing up. Each of these texts illustrates the struggles of the working class in general and the particular hardships of working class women. Observing how their mothers suffer in ways that go beyond the general *misère* that affects the rest of the family members, the daughters express the desire to avoid the trappings of traditional marriage and maternity that define women's normative roles.

Starting with the *filles du Roy*, women in rural Quebecc had always played an important role in maintaining traditional familial and religious values.[25] Forsyth notes that during the first 400 years of Quebecc's history, women had an "inescapable duty" to preserve both the French language and the Catholic religion in the home:

> Regardless of socio-economic realities, Quebecc society had an overriding vested interest in maintaining the myth of the mother with her large brood, living blissfully and harmoniously in an idyllic rural setting. [. . .] Until after the Second World War, the traditional myths served to maintain the structures of an agrarian society with a divinely inspired mission to preserve the French language and the Catholic faith on this continent. The role assigned to women in fulfilling these collective goals was crucial (45).

Authors of *romans du terroir* such as Hémon depict rural life by focusing both on the women's domestic tasks as well as the men's outdoor labors.[26] In *Women and Narrative Identity,* Mary Jean Green argues that while *Maria Chapdelaine* is the first novel of this sort to feature a female protagonist, there has been no real shift in the literary depiction of gender roles: "As opposed to the active masculine figures who dominated the nineteenth-century Quebecc *roman de la terre*, Maria Chapdelaine is hardly a heroic or even an active figure. [. . .] Maria remains enclosed within the space of domesticity. Like the traditional feminine figure, she spends most of her time not acting, but passively waiting" (55). Given the novel's historical context, Hémon could hardly have attributed more agency to his protagonist without sacrificing verisimilitude. It could be argued that Maria is internally active, as she thinks and writes by her motivation to decide whom she will marry. Had her suitor François Paradis lived, Maria most certainly would have married him, living in "paradis" with her beloved. However, after his death, she must make her selection based not on emotion, but rather on practicality. Her status of wife will determine what sort of life she will lead as an adult. Green argues that Maria is "passively waiting," however, I believe that Hémon emphasizes that Maria (as well as the other women in rural Quebecc) lead extremely active lives in terms of their devotion to the well-being of the family as well as their physical labor.

Making a distinction between men's work and women's work, Hémon focuses primarily on the physical demands of the men's work outside the home, comparing the men to soldiers, saying they finished their work "Comme s'ils sortaient d'une bataille" (88). The women take responsibility for the work inside the home, and Hémon explains that:

> Chez les Chapdelaine, les femmes n'avaient pas à participer aux travaux des champs. [. . .] Maria et sa mère *n'*eurent donc à faire *que* leur ouvrage habituel: la tenue de la maison, la confection des repas, la lessive et le raccommodage du linge, la traite des trois vaches et le soin des volailles et une fois par semaine la caisson du pain qui se prolongeait souvent tard dans la nuit" (88 my emphasis).

The restrictive *ne . . . que* construction employed by Hémon gives ironic emphasis to the lengthy list of the women's tasks, which are described in detail for several paragraphs.

Maria and her mother, Laura, work closely together in the house performing the chores necessary to running the household. Hémon makes it clear that Laura works diligently to ensure their family's comfort. She does complain occasionally about being so isolated from any neighbors, but she assures her husband that she has no regrets about their life together. Besides the housework, Maria's mother is in charge of the family's spirituality, leading her husband and children in prayers every night. Due to their distance from the church, they rarely attend mass, but despite their sporadic participation at church, the priest recognizes that Maria must be mourning after Francois Paradis's death and reminds her of her duties: "Une fille comme toi, c'est fait pour encourager ses vieux parents, d'abord, et puis après se marier et fonder une famille chrétienne" (140). Although God seemingly did not respect Maria's thousand Hail Mary prayers (said the day before Christmas Eve in order to ensure François Paradis's safe return), Maria takes the priest's words as well as her own religious, domestic and matrimonial duties seriously.

As love is no longer a factor, Maria chooses whom she will marry based upon what her life would be like with her two suitors: Eutrope Gagnon and Lorenzo Surprenant. The compatibility she imagines she would have with each man does not enter her thoughts. Hémon contrasts the two men as potential husbands. When Lorenzo makes his case to her, he stresses the fact that she would have a leisurely life with him: "Là-bas, dans les manufactures, vous auriez vite fait de gagner quasiment autant que moi; mais si vous étiez ma femme vous n'auriez pas besoin de travailler. Je gagne assez pour deux, et nous ferions une belle vie" (156). His descriptions appeal to Maria but contrast the reality of what the hard factory work in Boston would resemble. Most likely, Maria would not have a more leisurely or comfortable life in Boston, a revelation that would indeed be "Surprenant." Lorenzo's description contrasts Eutrope's acknowledgement that "Il faudrait travailler fort pour commencer. [. . .] mais vous êtes vaillante, Maria, et accoutumée à l'ouvrage, et moi aussi" (164). In opposition to what Maria imagines life in Boston to resemble (based upon Lorenzo's words), she recognizes that if she marries instead Eutrope and stays in Quebecc, she will lead "une vie de labeur grossier dans un pays triste et sauvage" (166). Yet Eutrope recognizes qualities of Maria that surpass the superficial (ie. her beauty and her stable family background). He understands who she is and his description of what their life could be like is based upon the recognition of comparable values. These two suitors prompt Maria to question the values of her mother that she always believed herself to share: "D'avoir entendu quinze ans durant sa mère vanter le bonheur idyllique des cultivateurs des vieilles paroisses, Maria en était venue tout naturellement à s'imaginer qu'elle partageait ses goûts; voici qu'elle n'en était plus aussi sure" (142). Laura's death prompts Maria to make her final decision.

As Laura suffers on her deathbed, she agonizes over the household work and has to be

reassured that Maria is handling everything. After she dies, Maria's father tells Maria about Laura's sacrifices and hard work; in essence, Maria is told that Laura was a dutiful woman, but in Maria's eyes, her mother was heroic. She knows that few women are capable of working so hard in desolate areas. Her mother was capable of it, and she knows that she, too, can lead a life like her mother. Hémon's use of the "voice of Quebecc" reminds the readers as well as Maria of the hard work of the Québécois "race": Maria hears the claim that "Au pays de Quebecc rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer" (213). It is primarily this reminder from Hémon's "voice of Quebecc" that encourages Maria to stay and marry Eutrope Gagnon; only afterwards does she recall the real necessity of her family that she stay and help once her mother is dead. Whereas the extreme cold of Quebecc killed François Paradis, the snowy winter outdoors suddenly appears beautiful to Maria. The "voice of Quebecc" calls Maria to her nationalist duty while the needs of her family remind her that she needs to take the place of her mother at home until her wedding. After Maria's decision is final, she thinks "avec un peu de regret pathétique aux merveilles lointaines qu'elle ne connaîtrait jamais et aussi aux souvenirs tristes du pays où il lui était commandé de vivre" (214). Maria rejects the false promises of these "merveilles lointaines" in favor of the familiar in order to fulfill her duty as a Québécois woman, just as her mother did.

Bonheur d'occasion continues the tradition of the *roman du terroir* in the sense that Gabrielle Roy depicts the struggles of an impoverished family. Roy's novel, however, takes place in an urban environment. The focus is no longer on "faire de la terre" (a motif throughout Hémon's novel) but on working in the city of Montreal. Azarius, the father, is usually unemployed, but Roy does not cast him as lazy; rather, he feels frustrated by his limited options and his inability to provide for his large family. As in *Maria Chapdelaine*, the eldest daughter of

the family is the protagonist. Florentine Lacasse, who works as a waitress, is the only family member with steady employment. Her mother, Rose-Anna, plays a significant role in the novel as well. According to Smart, *Bonheur d'occasion* is the first major novel of Quebecc with a mother who not only does not die but who also has a relationship with her daughter: "La première fille dans le roman québécois à ne pas être orpheline de mère, Florentine fait montrer dans ses rapports avec sa mère de toute l'ambivalence qui caractérise la relation complexe entre filles et mères" (*Écrire dans la maison du père* 216). While Hémon depicts a loving and mutually respectful mother-daughter relationship in *Maria Chapdelaine*, Roy's fictional mother-daughter relationship in her novel appears more complex. Not only does Roy provide her readers with interactions between Rose-Anna and Florentine, but she offers their internal contemplations regarding each other as well. Roy devotes a large part of her novel to this mother-daughter relationship in which both Rose-Anna and Florentine love but at times feel resentment toward each other. In her study on mother-daughter relationships in Québécois literature (*Au Nom de la mère*), Lori Saint-Martin reinforces the significance of the depiction of motherhood in this text by adding that Rose-Anna is a central character in Roy's novel: "*Bonheur d'occasion* [. . .] met en scène une mère qui non seulement survit jusqu'à la fin du roman, mais encore en est, avec sa fille, le personnage principal" (48). Despite the fact that Florentine dominates the novel's storyline, early critics seemed not to have been struck by her importance, focusing much more on Florentine's mother, Rose-Anna. Green observes that, "If we read early reviews of *Bonheur d'occasion*, the main character seems anyone but Florentine, who is mentioned only in summaries of the plot" (*Women and Narrative Identity* 62). Given that Rose-Anna was often praised by critics as the incarnation of traditional values, Green suggests that this dismissal could have been caused by Florentine's comparative lack thereof (she

is after all a young woman who does not wish to emulate her mother and, more seriously, becomes pregnant before she is married). To Green and other modern critics, it is clear that the mother-daughter relationship figures prominently in the novel's multiple storylines.

Roy presents her readers with generational perspectives of the mother-daughter dynamic: we see the mother-as-daughter as well as the daughter-as-mother. When Azarius takes his wife and children on a spontaneous trip to see his in-laws, Rose-Anna anticipates a return to her childhood home, which she idealizes as peaceful and joyful. At their arrival, however, Rose-Anna is reminded that reality does not match fantasy. Her sister immediately critiques the sickly appearance and ragged appearance of Rose-Anna's children. Rose-Anna becomes increasingly defensive when her own mother, Madame LaPlante reveals no happiness upon seeing her daughter: "[Rose-Anna] se sentait presque honteuse, tout à coup, honteuse d'être venue vers sa mère, non pas comme une femme mariée avec ses responsabilités [. . .] mais comme une enfant qui a besoin d'aide et de lumière" (202). Whereas Rose-Anna's primary characteristic is her maternal love, her own mother, Madame Laplante, has never shown affection toward any of her fifteen children, considering them burdens:

> [Madame Laplante] avait eu quinze petites têtes rondes et lisses contre son sein; elle avait eu quinze petits corps accorchés à ses jupes; elle avait eu un mari bon, affectueux, attentif, mais toute sa vie elle avait parlé de supporter ses croix, ses épreuves, ses fardeux.
>
> Elle avait parlé toute sa vie de résignation chrétienne et de douleurs à endurer. (203)

Despite Rose-Anna's efforts to mask her family's financial struggles, claiming that they are getting by, Madame Laplante correctly suspects her daughter's difficulties. Back at the house where she was raised, Rose-Anna feels not like the matriarch of her own family, but rather like a helpless child. Roy presents Rose-Anna and Madame Laplante as contrasting depictions of

motherhood. In opposition to Madame Laplante, Rose-Anna is driven throughout the novel by her genuine maternal love. Roy's use of "Madame" to refer to Rose-Anna's mother reinforces the lack of intimacy between the two women. The fact that her own mother sees motherhood as a burdensome duty makes Rose-Anna doubt the importance of her own love for her children. Green notes that "the unsympathetic figure of Madame LaPlante serves as a catalyst for Rose's profound questioning of the traditional maternal ideal, which, in practice, works to undermine the bonds of love uniting mother and child" (64-5). Rose-Anna's self-doubt heightens when her young son, Daniel, ends up in the hospital where he finds a substitute for his mother through Jenny, an English-speaking nurse who plays with him and brings him gifts. Despite the language barrier, Daniel assures his mother that he and Jenny understand each other perfectly. Rose-Anna interprets Daniel's words to mean that her role has been usurped by someone who does not even speak the same language: "Daniel avait tout ce qu'il lui fallait. Jamais il n'avait été si heureux. [. . .] Et un sentiment la saisit à la gare qui avait le goût du poison. 'Ils me l'ont pris, lui aussi,' pensa-t-elle. C'est facile aussi de me le prendre; il est si petit!" (237). Feeling as though she has failed her son, first by not being able to prevent his illness and then by not being able to care for him herself at the hospital, Rose-Anna ceases to visit him and wills herself nearly to forget about him, focusing instead on her other children. She does not know, however, that Jenny's stay in Daniel's hospital wing is temporary. After Jenny's departure, Daniel longs for his mother, who does not return: "Il avait réclamé sa mère qui ne venait pas, elle non plus, depuis longtemps. Maintenant, il ne réclaimait personne" (372).

While the rest of her family is visiting Rose-Anna's childhood home, Florentine, who has chosen to stay at home purposefully to spend time with her boyfriend Jean Lévesque, becomes pregnant after what might now be classified as date-rape.[27] The gravity of Florentine's

pregnancy is complicated by the personage of Jean, whose feelings for Florentine alternate between pity and desire. In *Écrire dans la maison du père,* Smart includes an excellent analysis of Jean's dominance that continuously reduces Florentine to the status of a woman-as-object. Ascribing sadomasochistic dynamics to their relationship based on traditional gender roles, Smart fails, however, to consider the role class plays as well in this situation. Jean, an ambitious young man who is driven by financial success, has overcome the poverty of his childhood and is frequently embarrassed by Florentine's gauche behavior. He hesitates before asking her out, wondering: "Est-ce que j'aurais honte de sortir avec elle?" (14). His embarrassment is evident as she commits her numerous *faux pas*. When they go to an upscale restaurant, for example: "Il éprouva du dépit, lorsqu'il la vit revenir, les lèvres épaisses de rouge, et précédée d'un parfum si violent, si vulgaire, que de chaque côté les consommateurs levaient la tête et souriaient. 'Pourquoi l'ai-je amenée ici?' se disait-il" (83). He is constantly cognizant of her economic status. Florentine's speech, mannerisms, and dress remind him of their difference in class background.[28] Jean's power over Florentine is therefore marked both by socio-economic superiority as well as by gender, culminating in implied sexual violence. A painting of Mary with baby Jesus hanging on the wall dominates the scene when Jean and Florentine are alone in her family's home. Roy depicts both Jean and Florentine as intermittently drawn to this picture. The idealized maternity associated with this image contrasts the reality of Jean's violence toward Florentine that results in an unplanned and unwanted pregnancy. This painting also recalls the power of the Catholic Church that condemns premarital sex, birth control and unwed mothers. The picture of Mary and Jesus also reminds Jean of his unhappy childhood, first in an orphanage and then with his adoptive mother who, after the death of her biological child, became hardened and unloving toward Jean. His childhood was lonely and Florentine's home (indeed, Florentine

herself) represents for Jean everything from his own childhood that was miserable. All of Jean's senses are overwhelmed by the evidence of poverty within Florentine's family home. Conquering Florentine physically and sexually, therefore, allows Jean to overpower the memories of an unhappy youth that continue to haunt him. By providing some background information regarding Jean's formative years, particularly his own relationship with his mother, Roy offers some potential explanations for Jean's treatment of Florentine, although she does not justify his behavior or actions.

Roy presents a situation that, as commonplace as it was and continues to be, opposes itself to the rigid ideal of what women's sexuality was supposed to look like in early 20th-century Quebecc (as well as France and other Catholic countries). Women were supposed to be sexually active only within a heterosexual marriage for which reproduction was the principle justification. In her study of Québécois women during the *entre-deux-guerres* period, *La Norme et les dévantes*, Andrée Lévesque notes that besides the chance for motherhood, the only other justifiable reasoning for women's sexual activity was "l'assouvissement des sens des époux. Sans ces conséquences génératrices ou hors du cadre matrimonial, elle était honnie de toutes ses formes: masturbation, lesbianisme, rapports hétérosexuels en dehors du marriage, rapports hétérosexuels avec contraceptifs" (139). In a society where motherhood was supposed to be the primary goal of women's sexual activity, abortion was condemned by both the church and by most physicians. Abortion was nevertheless a viable, although often dangerous, option for women in Florentine's position. Distraught by her pregnancy, Florentine turns to a female friend who, guessing Florentine's still undisclosed secret, hints at abortion. Florentine is repulsed by the thought of further violence done to her body: "Elle jouait avec l'idée, les membres crispés par la crainte de la douleur physique et sachant bien qu'elle ne pourrait pas l'accepter" (281).

Florentine therefore chooses to remain pregnant despite the stigma attached to unwed mothers and the concrete difficulties she will face as such. Lévesque notes in a well-documented chapter about abortion in Quebecc that people were often sympathetic toward women who had abortions: "On reconnaissait qu'une femme enceinte et sans mari puisse recourir aux moyens les plus extrêmes pour effacer ses fautes et ses suites" (113-4). Just four years after the publication of *Bonheur d'Occasion* in which the option of abortion is only hinted at and then rejected by the protagonist, the French author Simone de Beauvoir scandalized her readers by devoting the bulk of her chapter on "La Mère" in *Le Deuxième sexe*, to a discussion of abortion and birth control thereby negating Beauvoir's ironic opening sentence: "C'est par la maternité que la femme accomplit intégralement son destin physiologique" (290).[29] Although Beauvoir was writing in a French context, her chapter applied to women in Quebecc (and elsewhere) as well. While the expectation that women become mothers persists, what must accompany pregnancy and motherhood, however, is implicit within these expectations: the desire to become a parent, a heterosexual marriage and sufficient means by which to care for a family. Without each of these requirements, a woman in Quebecc might resort to abortion after having considered the disadvantages of the various social transgressions of a situation that did not meet the idealized norms of womanhood.

Without ever articulating her secret, Florentine attempts to turn to her mother for help, but, Rose-Anna is unable to assist her daughter's transition to parenthood. As Smart points out: "Rose-Anna, scandalisée peut-être autant par le piège biologique qui s'est refermé sur sa fille que par le 'péché' de celle-ci se refuse à sa fille dans ce moment de son plus grand besoin" (218). Unprepared to witness her daughters becoming adult women, Rose-Anna is equally troubled when she observes the development of her younger daughter Yvonne's body: "Sous le vêtement

de nuit, Rose-Anna venait de sentir les formes naissantes, toutes gracieuses de sa fille. 'Déjà!' se dit-elle. Et elle ne sut pas tout de suite si cette pensée lui donnait de la joie ou l'accablait davantage" (369). Despite her depiction of Rose-Anna's maternal love, Roy makes it clear that womanhood, synonymous with motherhood, is not something Rose-Anna looks forward to having her daughters experience. Roy ends her novel before the birth of Florentine's baby. However, she presents the birth of Rose-Anna's most recent child as a joy: "[Rose-Anna] s'abandonna enfin au repos, un bras supportant le tout petit être qui dormait. Elle se sentait vidée de douleur, de toute profonde tristesse. [. . .] Il lui sembla que ce n'était pas son douzième enfant qu'elle tenait contre elle, mais le premier, l'unique. Et pourtant, cette tendresse ravie n'excluait point les autres enfants" (366). The happiness and relief offered by holding a newborn infant is short-lived but a genuine experience of hope for the future.

Presenting Rose-Anna's own relationship with her mother as well as Florentine evolving from daughter to mother-to-be, Roy gives additional generational perspectives of mother-daughter relationships. Roy blurs further the traditional mother-daughter dynamic in this text by giving only to Florentine a job with a regular paycheck. Florentine's entire family therefore depends on her income. In a scene where Rose-Anna enters the restaurant where Florentine is employed, Florentine feels surprised by her mother's weariness and appearance of old age. The pity she feels for Rose-Anna reinforces Florentine's desire both to live a life different from that of her mother and to offer her mother some rare generosity:

> Le désir lui vint, subit, comme un mouvement de joie, d'être bonne aujourd'hui pour sa mère, plus attentive, plus douce, plus généreuse. [. . .] Et, soudain, elle comprit pourquoi ce désir inaccoutumé, ce désir à vrai dire inconnu lui gonflait le cœur; c'est qu'elle apercevait la vie de sa mère comme un long voyage gris, terne, que jamais, elle,

Florentine, n'accomplirait (119-20).

Florentine wants to treat her mother to a chicken dinner. Rose-Anna refuses at first, claiming that she is not hungry and that the meal costs too much. Florentine insists on providing nourishment for her mother and takes such pleasure in this reversal of familial roles that she decides to continue her generosity. After giving her mother some of her tips that she had been saving to buy herself silk stockings, Florentine almost instantly regrets this gesture: "Ce ravissement qu'elle avait ressenti à être généreuse, sans motif d'intérêt, ce ravissement infini laissait place en elle à une espèce de stupeur douloureuse. C'était une pure perte, cet acte, il ne servait à rien. C'était une goutte d'eau dans l'aridité de leur existence" (125). As much as Florentine wants to assist her family, in particular her mother, she also resents having to work so hard in order to buy the things she wants and needs. The concurrent pregnancies of both Rose-Anna and Florentine is another factor that complicates the mother-daughter relationship in this text. Although Florentine does not directly tell her mother she is pregnant, Rose-Anna's shocked dismay as she suspects Florentine's pregnancy parallels Florentine's own reaction to Rose-Anna's pregnancy: "'Tu seras pas fâchée, hein, Florentine, d'avoir une autre petite sœur?' 'Vinguienne, sa mère, vous trouvez pas qu'on est assez?' La phrase mauvaise lui avait échappé. Florentine la regretttait déjà, elle aurait voulu la reprendre" (89). Florentine fluctuates constantly between wanting to be generous toward her mother and feeling angry with her: "Moi, je ferai comme je voudrai. Moi, j'aurai pas de misère comme sa mère" (89). Neither woman meets the needs of the other regarding their simultaneous pregnancies.

Florentine attempts to distance herself from her mother by reveling in her relatively active independence; not only does her employment earn her some self-sufficiency (she is able to go out to the movies and to buy feminine trinkets and makeup) but she spends as little time as

possible at home with her family, feeling trapped by the enclosed space and constant reminders of their financial worries. Her independence is limited both by her status as a working-class woman and then by her pregnancy. Like Maria Chapdelaine, Florentine needs to marry in order to secure her future; furthermore, Florentine, too, marries someone she does not love. Rejected by Jean, she decides to wed his friend Emmanuel in order to avoid a shameful and alienated future as a single mother. Although she wills herself to think of her unborn baby as belonging to Emmanuel as opposed to Jean, she feels no love toward her child: "Elle ne l'aimait pas encore, cet enfant qui la ferait souffrir, sans doute ne l'aimerait-elle jamais, elle le redoutait même encore, mais elle s'habituerait peu à peu à le détacher de sa faute à elle, de sa grave erreur" (384). Additionally, Florentine does not love Emmanuel, although she is grateful to him for his love, financial support and generosity. Roy depicts how Florentine's "grave erreur" has forced her to settle into a loveless, although comfortable, marriage. Florentine no longer has the same liberties for which she had formerly hoped, and her adult life will most likely ressemble that of her mother, although Roy does suggest that financially, Florentine will be more comfortable.

Hémon and Roy both depict Laura Chapdelaine and Rose-Anna Lacasse as martyred figures. Laura, in her dying moments, suffers silently, focusing on her unfinished chores instead of her pain. Rose-Anna, too, worries ceaselessly in order to provide for her children. Laura's religious devotion adds to her characterization as a martyred figure, while Rose-Anna concentrates more on the day-to-day necessities rather than her family's spirituality. The stress of trying to get by leaves her with little capacity to focus on religion: "Rose-Anna chercha les mots de prière qu'elle récitait tous les soirs, seule, mais l'esprit n'y était point" (76). She is bemused by the acts of her younger daughter, Yvonne, who is attracted to religious piety: "Elle communiait tous les matins. Beau temps, mauvais temps, elle était la première sortie. Lorsqu'on

avait essayé de la retenir par les plus grands froids, elle avait fait des colères terribles, extraordinaires chez cette enfant nerveuse, effacée et si douce d'habitude" (94-5). When Rose-Anna ceases her visits to Daniel in the hospital, Yvonne continues to see him regularly, praying with him in order that he go to heaven. When Rose-Anna discovers that Yvonne, rather than herself, has been attending to her son, she is struck with guilt. Roy suggests a spiritual maturity on the part of Yvonne that allows her, despite her young age, to understand the sufferings of her mother: "Elle passa une main sous le menton d'Yvonne [. . .] et la regarda dans les yeux. L'expression qu'elle y lut la troubla profondément. C'était une expression de tendre pitié. [. . .] 'Pauvre maman, va! Pauvre maman!'" (369). While Yvonne apparently recognizes and has pity for her mother's sufferings, Rose-Anna does not feel capable of having a relationship with Yvonne in the same way that she does with Florentine: "Il apparut [à Rose-Anna] que l'enfant était retranchée de ce monde et, qu'entre elles, une distance infranchissable venait de s'établir. Alors, de toutes les séparations qui la frappaient, celle-ci lui parut tout à coup la plus dure, la plus mystérieuse et la plus nettement irréparable" (371). In an attempt to get to know Yvonne better, Rose-Anna asks if she, like her older sister Florentine, will get married one day. Yvonne says no and explains that she will become a nun, rejecting the lifestyle of her mother and sister (that of marriage and children).

In *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, published at the height of the *Révolution tranquille* in 1965, Marie-Claire Blais also depicts a daughter who is attracted to religion.[30] Héloïse stands apart from her sisters who, as they age, "se transformaient en lourdes femmes, et qui, aux champs, travaillaient comme des garçons robustes" (35). Blais does not differentiate between Héloïse's sisters, referring to them simply as "grandes A" or "petites A." Blais remarks that Héloïse has never worked as her sisters do, and that she feels separate from and even

disdainful toward them. Héloïse fasts for days on end and rarely leaves her bedroom. Whereas Yvonne in *Bonheur d'Occasion* seems to comprehend her mother (although she herself is a source of bemusement for her mother), Héloïse is remarkably self-centered and does not pay much attention to any of her family members. While Héloïse's brothers, particularly the observant Jean Le Maigre, take notice of the hard work and sadness of their mother (for example, when she mourns her deceased children), Héloïse focuses solely inward. In Roy's text, Yvonne seems genuinely motivated by religious feelings and a desire to help people in need, but Héloïse is driven to excessive acts of penance due to her attraction to sensual experiences. Her siblings note that "Dès l'enfance, Héloïse a manifesté cet amour pour la torture" (35). Her brothers are fascinated by her, and their discovery of her masturbating is one moment in a series where she is caught (or fears being caught) during moments of physical pleasure. At the convent, Héloïse discovers sensual pleasures for the first time, and at first these are limited to the good food, comfortable surroundings, visually stimulating religious artwork and the friendly voices of the nuns. Her desires then turn sexual. She fantasizes about a sometimes violent *Époux*, but is horrified to be caught in the midst of her fantasies by the mother superior: "Enveloppée des caresses mystérieuses, elle baignait dans l'étreinte de l'Époux en savourant le plus de Bonheur possible. Mais quelle humiliation lorsque Mère Supérieure ouvrait la porte de la cellule en criant: 'Par le ciel et tous les démons, qu'est-ce que je vois dans mon couvent?'"(100). Shocked by Héloïse's behavior, the mother superior sends her home. Even after her dismissal from the convent, Héloïse continues to have dreams in which she is caust in the midst of sexual pleasure.

Héloïse's masochism eventually ceases to be expressed through fasting and other religious rituals and, instead, she enjoys her sexuality as she finds work in a brothel. Blais's obvious comparisons between the brothel and the convent make her scorn for the hypocrisies of

the Catholic church clear. Héloïse's room at the brothel reminds her of her bedroom at the convent; the overt sexual vices that take place at the brothel are innocuous (and consensual) compared to the molestation that takes place by le Frère Théodule at the religious school where Héloïse's brother is sent. Lévesque notes that during the first half of the 20th century, young girls such as Héloïse often ended up working as prostitutes while searching for "legitimate" employment: "D'après le chef de police de Montréal, les adolescentes qui entraient au bordel arrivaient souvent de la campagne pour travailler comme domestiques et, lors d'une sortie, se faisaient leurrer par des compagnes ou des proxénètes permettant des revenus alléchants" (141). Héloïse discovers a way to make a living that satisfies her emotionally and physically, and she finds a substitute for her biological mother (with whom she does not identify) in the madam of the brothel, Madame Octavie, who resembles the mother superior at the convent. Héoïse reveres both women equally, observing similarities between Madame Octavie and the mother superior (such as their love for cheese and frugality); this reinforces her conviction that Madame Octavie is, like the mother superior, a good woman. Although Madame Octavie is not allowed in the town's church, she is an otherwise respected woman who in her own way is charitable toward those in need of aid, helping both her male clients and her young female employees who are often poor, sick, and in need of a home as well as employment. Blais depicts the brothel as providing more genuine assistance to those in need than the church.

In this novel, a satire of the traditional *roman de la terre*, Blais exaggerates the mother's obedience to the point of caricature. The mother of Héloïse is not simply dutiful, she is a silent slave who is constantly pregnant. She must return to her hard work in the field immediately after giving birth to Emmanuel, her fifteenth child and the youngest baby. The mother, who remains nameless throughout the text, is too worn out from work and childbirth to care for her new baby:

"Voici sa mère. [Emmanuel] la reconnaît. Elle ne vient pas vers lui encore. Il pourrait croire qu'elle l'a abandonné. [. . .] Elle ne semble pas se souvenir de lui avoir donné naissance, ce matin. [. . .] Sa mère est silencieuse. Elle sera toujours silencieuse" (12). The only time the mother speaks during the entire novel is indirectly through Jean Le Maigre's observance of her stating that "La vie est dure et les hommes cruels" during sexual activity with her husband (70). The household is dominated, however, not by her husband but by her own mother, the grandmother Antoinette, who, like a queen, reigns over the household. Because of the economic necessity for the mother to work alongside her husband and older children outside of the home, the domestic and maternal duties are taken over by the grandmother. Antoinette leads the family in prayer, takes charge of the children's schooling, and argues with her son-in-law over his children's futures. The father in this novel wants his children to work and is against education and any sort of intellectualism; his hostility toward school reveals that he is against progress.

However, *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* ends on a potentially optimistic note as Antoinette suggests: "Oui, ce sera un beau printemps" (165). The name Emmanuel recalls the Biblical Emmanuel, signifying savior, and he and his generation may bring a better future. Although Blais does not specify the time frame of this novel, it clearly takes place before its publication during the *Révolution tranquille.* The father's disdain for education and his valorization of learning to tend the land recalls the "faire de la terre" refrain of *Maria Chapdelaine* and other *romans du terroir*. The dominance of the church, the poverty of the extremely large family (Emmanuel is the sixteenth child, although several siblings have died due to illnesses such as tuberculosis), and the squalor of the overcrowded family home (Blais describes the infestations of rats and lice; four siblings in a bed leads to incestuous relationships between brothers) all contribute to an exaggerated depiction of unidealized, rural Quebecc.

Lori Saint-Martin's short story, "Pur Polyester," published in her collection of short stories *Mon Père, la nuit* in 1999, recalls Hémon's novel in the very first paragraph. The unnamed narrator is instantly revealed as an outsider, due to cultural misunderstandings and economic disadvantage: "'Un Québécois pur laine' Pure laine comme Maria Chapdelaine? Mais non, Louis Hémon était un maudit Français. Faut pas confondre. Je suis immigrante, je confonds. Pour nous, pas de laine, la vie est trop chère ici et mes parents trop pauvres. Pur polyester" (59). Like Maria Chapdelaine as well, the narrator is torn between her parents' origins and an unknown but potentially better situation. In this short story, Saint-Martin emphasizes the struggles of belonging to at once more than one culture but none completely. The narrator and her parents have come from Spain, then France, and finally Quebecc in attempt to create a better life for themselves. Saint-Martin's play with the term "polyester" defines the narrator's identity of belonging to many ("poly-") cultures and her title suggests that having a multicultural and transnational background is no less "pur" than those belonging to only one place. In this working-class family, the mother of the narrator works in the laundry room of a hospital and her father works as a repairman. The narrator recognizes that due to her social and linguistic outsider status, she does not blend in among her peers. At school, however, there are two other immigrant girls who also attempt to rid themselves of their evident differences by effacing their identities. Rosa, from Guatemala, diets in order to become thin like the other Québécois girls. Another classmate, "An Li qui se fait appeler Diana" (66), perms her hair and, although everyone laughs at her at first, a boy asks her out and she knows that she was right to alter her appearance as well as her name. The narrator becomes aware that some people blame immigrants, such as her family, for the failed referendum for Quebecc's sovereignty, and the narrator believes that she will never be included in the "nous" of the Québécois people:

> Mes parents ont voulu, à coup d'efforts, me donner les clés de ce pays à eux fermé. Voulu que la langue de ce pays coule de source dans ma bouche, que je sois chez moi là où ils ne seront jamais chez eux. Je suis avec eux, je suis toute seule, je suis aussi avec les gens d'ici, de mon pas-tout-à-fait-mais-presque-pays. Entre deux, sur la brèche, en train, peut-être, de devenir, mais le devient-on jamais? Québécoise" (68).[31]

Saint-Martin sometimes blurs the roles between mother and daughter in this text, which reinforces the narrator's sense of responsibility toward her mother. The narrator recognizes the hard work and physical demands of her mother's labor: "Pourtant je sais que maman hait la buanderie, meme si elle n'en parle jamais. [. . .] La fatigue dans l'os, l'air plein de charpie qui rape les poumons, les longues heures debout, dans l'ennui et le grondement des sécheuses et la mauvaise lumière au néon qui fait les visages tout mouchetés" (64). Her mother encourages her to get good grades in order eventually to go to college so that she will get a good job and have an easier life than that of her parents. The narrator is not even certain that she likes school, but because her parents could not complete their education, she feels that must go in their place and succeed. Like the father in Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, the narrator's father in Saint-Martin's story believes that education will not benefit his daughter. He argues with the narrator's mother about what should be their daughter's priority: "'Ce n'est pas avec des A qu'on trouve un mari,' dit mon père. 'Tu ferais bien mieux d'aider ta mère à la cuisine.' 'Tu voudrais qu'elle finisse à la buanderie, elle aussi? Ma fille à moi ira à l'université'" (68). The narrator recognizes it is for her own benefit that her mother works so hard. She wants to become a doctor someday and imagines herself supporting her mother. While her mother suffers during her long days working in the hospital's laundry room, the narrator imagines herself as an adult being in a prestigious position at the same hospital: "Quand je serai grande je serai médecin et reine de

l'hôpital, je guérirai les enfants malades et je guérirai aussi la fatigue de maman" (64). By filling an important role at the place where her mother currently labors in one of the least prestigious positions, the narrator will have at once avenged her mother's sufferings. The only problem is that the narrator thinks her mother might want to return to Spain, whereas she might like to take root in Quebecc. Similarly to Maria Chapdelaine in Hémon's novel when she imagines life with Lorenzo Surprenant outside of Quebecc, Saint-Martin's narrator worries about betraying her mother. They have left Spain to find a better life, and the narrator feels trapped between her roots and the desire to find a permanent home where she can belong: "Je te trahis, maman, en prenant racine dans ce pays, avec mon école, mon amie Rosa et puis, qui sait? Un jour, dans ma vie, un garçon d'ici" (64). Marriage (and presumably children) with a Québécois man would further break her connection to her Spanish origins.

While the narrator hopes to someday take care of her mother financially, Saint-Martin emphasizes that she already takes care of her mother linguistically: "En espagnol, la voix de mama est pleine de musique. Ses idées sont trop grandes pour ses pauvres mots de français" (63). Although the narrator is conscious of her status as a "parlant-autre," she, unlike her mother, is able to get by in the French of Quebecc. The narrator begins speaking for her mother when they are in public in order to save her mother from embarrassment and frustration: "Le pli inquiet disparaît du front de maman, et je comprends que, devant témoin, elle ne parlera plus. Je devrai me glisser entre elle et le monde, pour la protéger. Je suis devenue sa voix, son souffle. *Je suis devenue sa mère*" (63 my emphasis). The narrator realizes that she must take on greater responsibilities in order to repay her mother back for her hard work and sacrifices she has made; her mother is silenced due to her status as a non-native French speaker, so she must serve as interpreter. However, she is aware of her own linguistic deficiencies; she does not use her native

Spanish often enough to master that language, and she is unfamiliar with the vocabulary particular to Quebecc: "J'ai deux langues, et je n'en ai pas. Mon espagnol est lamentable, dit maman, pauvre, hésitant, trop proche du français. À l'école on m'appelle la Parisienne" (64). Saint-Martin illustrates the narrator's frustrations with mastering the variation of French spoken in Quebecc due to her familiarity with both the variation of French spoken in France and the variation spoken in Quebecc: "Gilet et pull, piasses et fric, polyvalente ou lycée, les mots me manquent, ou plutôt j'en ai trop. Comment trier? Et le livre de téléphone et bienvenue comme réponse à merci, c'est de ma faute tout ça?" (65).[32] Additionally, Saint-Martin's use of code-switching (between Spanish and French), as well as her sentence structures which are often grammatically incomplete (and often either very short or else long, run-on sentences), depict a grammatically imperfect yet rich and poetic linguistic expression: "La neige, le froid, les doigts morts. Le froid brûle autant que le feu, on ne savait pas. [. . .] Ay Dios, que espanto! [. . .] Mi pais c'est l'hiver (66)." Saint-Martin expresses the frustration of knowing multiple languages that allow yet being a non-native speaker of the dominantly spoken language. Saint-Martin's narrator embraces Quebecc as her country, despite her status as "other," and is determined to find success in order to make up for the sacrifices made by her mother, to secure a more comfortable future.

The mothers in these novels work hard and make sacrifices in order to give their children a good life. Devoting themselves to their families and fulfilling their normative duties as wives and mothers, these women suffer from their hard work and the constant worry that comes with financial hardship. In Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*, Laura Chapdelaine longs to live in closer proximity to neighbors, but she embraces their isolation and is depicted as heroic for her social sacrifices. The "reward" for these sacrifices, following in the tradition of literary mothers in the

romans du terroir, is a premature death. In Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion*, Rose-Anna's maternal love drives her to maintain an ability to feed and house her numerous, sickly children despite her husband's inability to keep a job. Her son Daniel dies and one of her older sons as well as her husband eventually join the army, which to her is both tragic and fortunate (the army ensures a steady income). By the end of the novel, Rose-Anna gives birth to her youngest child who symbolizes hope for their family: "Mais l'enfant, c'était l'avenir, mais l'enfant c'était vraiment leur jeunesse retrouvée, c'était le grand appel à leur courage" (369). Similarly, the newborn son, Emmanuel, in Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*, represents a younger generation that offers hope for a future with fewer hardships. The mother's sufferings are extreme compared to those experienced by Laura Chapdelaine and Rose-Anna Lacasse; her complete silence reveals her exhaustion and hopelessness. The narrator's mother in Saint-Martin's "Pur Polyester" has moved to two different countries in order to better support her family. Seeing her daughter get an education in order to have a good future is worth working long hours at a tedious job for little income and being both a linguistic and social outsider in Quebecc.

With the exception of Héloïse in Blais's novel, the daughters in each of these texts are aware both of how hard their mothers labor and of their families' dire economic status. While the authors choose various settings: (the countryside for Hémon and Blais and the city for Roy and Saint-Martin), making a living and taking care of her family is the priority, albeit a difficult one, for each of the mothers. The daughters in each of these texts choose their vocations based on their observations of their mothers' labors and worries. Maria Chapdelaine is inspired both by her mother's life and by the history of the Québécois people to live exactly as her mother did. She will marry Eutrope Gagnan and continue her mother's legacy. On the other hand, the other three texts studied here feature daughters who hope for a different lifestyle than that of their

mothers. These young women want to "gagner leur vie" in multiple senses: they want to earn a living but also to choose their own paths in life. Florentine is determined not to be unhappy and constantly worried like her mother. While her waitressing job offers her some financial freedom, her pregnancy and resulting marriage to a man she does not love limit her independence and suggest that as a wife and mother, her life will not be unlike that of her own mother. Her younger sister Yvonne as well as Héloïse in Blais's novel find religion an attractive alternative to marriage. Héloïse ultimately finds a home and a surrogate family in the brothel where she works. Finally, the narrator in "Pur Polyester" both admires and pities her mother for working so hard at a miserable job in a country where she will never fully belong. She is determined to succeed academically in order to become a doctor to support her mother one day. Saint-Martin's narrator plans to stay permanently in Quebecc and even marry a Québécois man, betraying her parents' roots, but ensuring herself (and her own future children) stability. For Maria Chapdelaine and her family, life is difficult in Quebecc, and although Maria enjoys hearing about the pleasures available in cosmopolitan Boston, she cannot imagine leaving her family and the familiar. On the other hand, the narrator's family in Saint-Martin's short story has emigrated from Spain to France and finally to Quebecc to have a more comfortable life. Although her parents work hard in difficult jobs, the narrator recognizes the relative comfort of their life despite the fact that they are poor. Like Maria Chapdelaine, Saint-Martin's narrator recognizes and appreciates the struggles and sacrifices of her mother and plans to stay in Quebecc. In these four texts of Quebecc, from mothers to daughters, from the countryside to the city, and from "pure laine" to "pur polyester," the authors depict a determination on the part of the daughters not simply to survive, but to succeed.

Chapter 2

Wicked Mothers and Stepmothers During the *Grande Noirceur* Period

An anti-archetypical mother becomes a recurring literary motif in the years following World War II and preceding the *Révolution Tranquille* in Quebecc. In opposition to the selfless "guardian of the hearth" archetype (as exemplified in texts such as Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine*), the mothers featured in works such as Marie-Claire Blais's first novel *La Belle Bête* (1959) and Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* (1945) are controlling, abusive and negligent. These anti-maternal figures serve as tools to critique the repressive era during which these texts were written. In this chapter, I also consider the influential legend of Aurore Gagnon, a Québécois girl who died at the age of 10 due to neglect and physical abuse from her stepmother and her father.[33] Her death was in 1920, but the story has consistently maintained its presence within Quebecc's cultural history, as demonstrated by the number of artistic pieces inspired by Aurore: at least two plays, several novels, a television special and two films (the most recent of which is *Aurore*, written and directed by Luc Dionne in 2005). Here, I examine two of these pieces that were produced during the same period as the literary texts by Hébert and Blais: the 1952 film, *La Petite Aurore: l'enfant martyre,* directed by Jean-Yves Bigras, as well as a novel, *Le Drame d'Aurore: l'enfant martyre*, written by Yves Thériault (under the pseudonym Benoît Tessier) and published the same year as the film.[34] Given the widespread newspaper coverage of the Aurore *fait divers* and its aftermath, it is likely that Aurore's legend and/or its literary and cinematographic interpretations influenced authors such as Hébert and Blais in their depictions of cruel mothers.

The principal difference between the works based upon the legend of Aurore Gagnon and the literary texts written by Hébert and Blais, is the extent of abuse and of victimhood among the

family members. Aurore is abused by her stepmother andabused or at the very least neglected by her father. On the other hand, fathers are completely absent in *La Belle Bête* and *Le Torrent* and the abuse is directed solely from the biological mothers. Finally, while the abuse inflicted upon Aurore eventually kills her, the children in the other texts (Isabelle-Marie in *La Belle Bête* and François in *Le Torrent*) reverse the patterns of abuse by killing their mothers. Also, while Aurore is depicted as an unequivocal victim, and her stepmother as a tormenter, the status of the protagonists in these other works are more ambiguous. Isabelle-Marie and François are older adolescents and are not entirely sympathetic characters themselves; additionally, there is the potential for some empathy for the mothers, even given their overall cruel tendencies. Despite these differences, each author reveals an ugliness that can be interpreted as representative of the repressive nature that characterizes the Duplessis period (1944-1959) during which these texts were produced. This era is also referred to as *la grande noirceur* due to its repressive nature. Recalling his experience in Quebecc during this time in an rticle in *Le Devoir* published in 2010, author Jacques Godbout explains, "Quand, dans ma génération, nous parlons de 'grande noirceur,' nous évoquons le contrôle pervers de la sexualité, le mépris de l'industrie, de l'art, de l'économie et le refus de la pensée scientifique. Nous parlons de la vie de l'esprit" (9). Another example of the severe control and religious hypocrisy associated with this time is the story of the "Duplessis orphans," thousands of children in the 1940s and 1950s (usually born out of wedlock) who were falsely labeled as mentally ill and forced to remain in psychiatric institutions, in order for the government to receive federal funds for medical care. As adults, these former orphans have claimed that they had been tortured, sexually and physically abused, and that they had undergone medical experimentation, including electroshock treatment and lobotomies.[35] These allegations create additional examples of abuse, manipulation and corruption at the hands of

governmental and religious authorities.

One reason why the Aurore legend has continued to resonate with the people of Quebecc is perhaps its promulgation of the "wicked stepmother" trope. The stepmother has traditionally been portrayed (for example, in fairy tales and mythological legends) as evil and as a usurper of the "natural" (biological) mother. The depiction of abuse by a stepmother shocks the readers or viewers less than abuse of children by a biological mother. In both the novel and the film, Aurore refuses to call her stepmother anything but "Madame," which her stepmother resents, and which emphasizes Aurore's understanding that her stepmother is not an authentic maternal replacement. In both the film and the novel, the stepmother (Mélanie in the novel and Marie-Louise in the film) suggests that there are too many females in the household:

> Mélanie haussa les épaules.
>
> - Tu es mal élevée, dit-elle, et je vais t'enseigner les bonnes manières. À partir de tout de suite, tu vas m'appeler maman.
>
> Mais Aurore bondit:
>
> - Non, dit-elle, vous n'avez pas le droit de vous faire appeler comme ça!
>
> Mélanie la fixa un moment. Ses petits yeux noirs, infiniment cruels, indiquaient bien à Aurore qu'elle n'avait à attendre aucune pitié de cette femme. [. . .]
>
> - D'ailleurs, continua Mélanie, d'une voix froide, *il y en a une de trop dans la maison*. (Tessier 27-8 my emphasis)

The argument that there cannot be another woman in the household also plays on a stereotype, that of female jealousy. In the film, there is an additional concrete reason for the stepmother to desire Aurore's death: Aurore sees Marie-Louise poison her mother in order to kill her and marry Théodore (her father).[36] Marie-Louise learns that Aurore has witnessed her crime, so she begins

her abuse in order to scare her into silence. While (the nonfictional) Aurore Gagnon's autopsy showed that the continuous beatings were the cause of her death, the reasons behind and details of the abuse are unknown, allowing for imaginative liberties in the creative interpretations of the case. In both the novel and the film, the stepmother deprives Aurore of food. In the cinematic version, her deprivation is often shown juxtaposed with images of the well-fed Maurice (Marie-Louise's biological son); in the novel, the details of her starvation are especially pronounced. The stepmother also forces Aurore to eat soap, to complete exhausting and numerous chores, and she beats and burns AuroreIn both texts, the stepmother resents Aurore's presence to the extent that she chooses kill her slowly by means of abuse.

In his novel, Tessier makes reference to the stereotype that stepmothers, in general, are cruel: after some neighbors begin to suspect that Aurore is being abused, they recall the abuse of another stepmother that they know: "Les mauvais traitements que [ma cousine] a enduré avec sa belle-mère. Des claques en plein visage, des coups de pieds, pas manger à moitié de sa faim . . . C'est tellement pareil à ça" (66). However, there are détails in both the novel and the film that suggest that Mélanie/ Marie-Louise is inherently cruel – it is not simply her status as stepmother that renders her cruel. While the author and filmmakers recall the stereotypes associated with stepmothers, they do not rely solely on the status of stepmother to justify her abusive nature. For example, in the film, a neighbor named Catherine plays a key role and presents an alternative depiction of a stepmother. Catherine is about to marry a widower, Abraham, who has children from his previous marriage. After Catherine and Abraham begin to suspect Marie-Louise's abuse of Aurore, Abraham begins to question whether it is a good idea to get married themselves, given that stepmothers in general are known to have difficult relationships with their stepchildren. Catherine indignantly insists that she is not like Marie-Louise: "Écoute Abraham,

les enfants ça fait pas de misère à personne, surtout si on ne veut pas qu'ils nous en donnent. Moi, tu sais, je m'appelle Catherine, pas Marie-Louise! Puis je me demande si c'est bien Aurore qui fait de la misère à sa belle-mère, ou si c'est pas le contraire plutôt!" Catherine later makes several references to her stepchildren and how much she loves them, and there is no evidence given for the viewers to suspect otherwise. In fact, after Aurore's death, Catherine asks her husband if they can take in Aurore's brother Maurice; she is therefore eager to serve as a "good" stepmother to yet another child. Catherine's relationship to Aurore is that of a savior; she is the only character to suspect and then witness the abuse, serve as confessor to Aurore and eventually report it. Catherine's role in the film makes it clear that having the status of stepmother does not inevitably result in cruelty.

Catherine and Marie-Louise appear in several scenes together, and the juxtaposition of these two stepmothers emphasizes their differences. Catherine is nearly always smiling (except when she is expressing concern about Aurore), whereas Marie-Louise rarely smiles (except when she is abusing Aurore). Marie-Louise (played by Lucie Mitchell) is tall, broad-shouldered and stiff, while Catherine (played by Jeannette Bertrand is petite with a curvaceous figure and appears much more animated. Marie-Louise has a deeper-timbred voice and is overall more masculine in presentation than Catherine. Similarly, in the *Aurore* novel, Tessier presents Aurore's stepmother Mélanie as masculine in both appearance and behavior: "Pourtant, la cruauté de Mélanie était évidente. Elle se lisait dans ses yeux, sur le pli de la lèvre, dans *la carrure masculine* et le geste rude. Même la voix, rêche, autoritaire, trahissait la femme" (42 my emphasis). The masculine characteristics of the evil stepmothers in the *Aurore* film and novel reinforce their status as "unnatural" women and emphasize their anti-maternal qualities. In Tessier's novel, after the death of Aurore, Mélanie's hanging is delayed because she is pregnant

(this was also the case for the real Aurore's stepmother). However, the baby is born prematurely, and dies; Mélanie also dies during the delivery. Not only is the baby premature, but something is wrong with him: "Il n'aurait pas été . . . normal . . ." (167) the priest explains vaguely to Odilon (Aurore's father). Mélanie's failure to give birth to a healthy baby and to die during the baby's delivery is additional evidence that she is a unnatural as a woman. On the other hand, in the film, Marie-Louise arrives with her biological child (significantly, a son), Maurice, whom she does not mistreat, although she does not appear affectionate toward him or the baby she and Théodore have had together. She directs her abuse solely at Aurore.

In both the novel and the film, the stepmother enjoys her cruel and violent actions. Marie-Louise's evident pleasure obtained from her abuse of Aurore brings a hint of sadomasochism to the film, particularly during a scene where she cackles in delight as she beats Aurore with a whip.[37] However, it is the least physically painful act forced upon Aurore, a haircut, which appears as the most dramatic and drawn out scene. After having pushed Aurore into a bed of plants, Aurore emerges with a crown of thorns, an allusion to the martyrdom of Jesus Christ. Marie-Louise smiles gleefully as she cuts off Aurore's hair, tangled with thorns. "Pitié! Pitié, Madame!" cries Aurore amid her tears as strong organ music highlights the gravity of this action. By cutting off her long hair, often described previously as "si beaux cheveux," Marie-Louise has removed an important element of Aurore's feminine beauty. Aurore's reaction to having her hair cut off (the only scene of abuse during which she vocally protests) suggests that the removal of her hair and her resulting, more androgynous appearance is the act that affects her the most, again supporting the notion that feminine beauty reflects character and self-worth.

While the stepmother is presented as the villain in these works, Aurore's father is far

from innocent. In the novel, Odilon is presented as impatient and self-absorbed. When Aurore reacts sadly to the news that he will be remarrying and that they will be moving far from where her mother is buried, he harshly responds: "Tais-toi, cria-t-il, arrête de parler de ta mère! Tu vas en avoir une autre mère. Puis si tu veux mon idée, elle va être beaucoup meilleure que la première, pour toi!" (15). The author presents Odilon as oblivious to what is described as the obvious cruelty of Mélanie: "N'importe quel étranger l'eût constaté. Sauf Odilon, qui fut le dernier à savoir ce qui se passait" (42). The narrator suggests, however, that his ignorance is not his fault, because he has been tricked by his new wife: "Telle est l'inconscience de l'homme devant les ruses d'une femme" (42). Even after the death of Aurore, he is not to be blamed: "Des gens plus ou moins bien informés, blâmaient le père. D'autres, *plus lucides*, voyaient bien que le pauvre homme n'avait été qu'une victime à son tour, cette fois de la duplicité de la femme" (134 my emphasis). In the film as well, Aurore's father appears blind to what is happening in his home. Occasionally, he shakes his head slowly as if he does not approve, or at the very least is musing over, his wife's puzzling behavior. He actively participates in the abuse during at least one occasion: after his wife lies, saying she caught Aurore and Maurice kissing, he beats Aurore on the head, the act of which renders her unconscious. His immediate remorse is evident, as he carries Aurore carefully to her bed. At that point, he notices the burns on her scalp where she has been scalded. He then realizes that Marie-Louise has been abusing Aurore, but he does nothing to change the situation: "Je ne sais quoi faire," he repeats. He still seems uncertain as to what precisely is happening in the household, and he does not confront his wife. As Aurore is at the brink of death due to starvation and physical injuries from the beatings, Catherine finally reveals to the priest and the doctor the abuse that Aurore described to her. Odilon excuses his ignorance: "J'étais toujours dehors. Quand je rentrais, je croyais toujours ce

que ma femme me disait." This bemusement of not just the father but also of the suspecting neighbors remains a strong theme in both the novel and the film. The neighbors express reluctance to meddle in other people's family matters and worry about how to prove the abuse (despite the fact that Aurore appears in the film and is described in the novel as emaciated and covered in bruises and burns). This reluctance perhaps also stems from a genuine confusion about how to respond to respond to violence perpetrated by a woman, particularly by a woman in a mothering role, despite the "evil stepmother" stereotype. The excuses given by Aurore's fictional father are similar to those expressed in the actual case of Aurore Gagnon, whose father was condemned to a life sentence (unlike her stepmother who was sentenced to hang). There was some public sympathy for him due to an understanding his wife tricked him. He participated in the beatings of his daughter due to lies regarding Aurore's behavior:

> À la reprise du procès de Télesphore Gagnon, on a entendu le jeune Georges-Étienne Gagnon, âgé de 7 ans, qui a affirmé que son père battait sa fille Aurore avec des fouets et des harts, sur les racontars que lui faisait sa mère. L'enfant dit que le père ne l'aurait pas battue, s'il n'avait été exaspéré par les dires de la femme Gagnon. (*Le devoir* 27 avril 1920, p. 3)[38]

In reality and in the fictional representations of Aurore's case, the father is given less blame than the stepmother, because he holds less responsibility in the household. The father trusts his wife to be a good mother, and therefore he is less culpable, although the filmmaker and author do not claim his complete innocence. In the real case, both Aurore's father and stepmother ended up serving shorter sentences than those to which they had been condemned. Télesphore Gagnon ended up only serving five years of his life imprisonment, perhaps because of public sympathy for having been "tricked" by his wife, Marie-Anne, who in turn, was originally sentenced to be

hanged. This was changed to life imprisonment because she was pregnant at the time. However, after 15 years in prison, she was released. Numerous letters written by Marie-Anne Houde to officials express various defenses. She often claims that she was mentally unstable at the time and that she is truly innocent. In her letters written to the Department of Justice, begging for clemency, Marie-Anne Houde's principal argument is that her other children need her. She repeatedly claims that she is an excellent mother and that she loves her children. For example, in a letter dated December 5, 1924, she writes: "Vous me paraissez à croire que je n'ai pas d'amour pour les enfants je puis vous dire que je ne croit [*sic*] pas qu'il est une femme dans cette institution qui peut aimer les enfants plus que moi" (December 5, 1924).[39] Despite her abuse of Aurore, Marie-Anne continues to portray herself as a good, loving mother to her other (biological) children.

Both the novel and the film based upon the legend of Aurore assign blame primarily to the stepmother but also to Aurore's father and the neighbors, who are also at fault due to their delays in actively responding to their suspicions. Implied blame is also given to the Catholic Church. In the film, there are crosses hung on the (otherwise undecorated) walls in nearly every scene that takes place indoors, which serve to remind viewers of the importance of religion to this community. Upon hearing Aurore's confession, Catherine immediately notes the religious hypocrisy of Marie-Louise: "C'est impossible d'aller à l'église tous les dimanches et puis de massacrer un enfant comme ça!" In both the novel and the film, concerned neighbors seek out the priest for assistance, but he does not actively assist Aurore. In the film, the priest speaks with Aurore privately (by offering Aurore confession, her stepmother is forced to wait anxiously in the next room). Aurore reveals to him that her stepmother has been abusing her, and he promises

to help her. "Sauvez-moi! Vite! Vite!" Aurore begs him. "Surtout conserve la grande confiance en Dieu," the priest advises her. He says nothing to her father, does nothing, and, oddly, seems to forget the entire incident. As Aurore is dying, her father runs to get the priest and the doctor. It is then that Catherine reveals what Aurore has told her. Despite the fact that Aurore had previously explained the abuse to the priest, he acts surprised: "Expliquez-vous!" he demands, when Catherine accuses Aurore's stepmother and father. Of course, by then it is too late, and it is obvious to the viewers that Aurore needed something more than "confiance en Dieu" to save her. Tessier's priest appears equally ineffectual in his novel. The neighbors express their frustration with his passive behavior: "Cest le meilleur curé au monde, mais ce n'est pas lui qui prend feu à la moindre chose" (96). While the priests are not portrayed as villainous, their passivity makes it clear that religious authorities are not helpful in serious situations.

The implied criticism of the Catholic Church in this film and novel reflect the increased disassociation and displeasure with the institutionalization of the Catholic church during the Duplessis era in Quebecc. After the Second World War, there was an increase in secular values, yet the power of the church remained just as strong as it had for the past century (Tétu de Labsade, 172). In 1948, a manifesto entitled *Refus global*, authored primarily by artist Paul-Emile Borduas but with the assistance of a group of other artists and intellectuals, called for a rejection of Quebecc's traditional (and most notably, religious) values: "La société née dans la foi périra par l'arme de la raison: L'INTENTION" (cited in de Labsade, pp. 258-9, emphasis in original).[40] Historian de Labsade agrees that during the Duplessis era, the government sought to maintain Quebecc's historical status as an agriculturally-based and religious province and strove to halt technological and social advances (122).

La Petite Aurore: l'enfant martyre, *Le Drame d'Aurore: l'enfant martyre*, *Le Torrent*, and *La Belle Bête* all reflect the tensions of a changing province through their criticism of religious institutions and their depiction of violent family dynamics, particularly the violence exhibited by the mothers or stepmothers. During the Second World War, the number of women in the workplace increased rapidly, as they were called to take over in positions traditionally filled by men. At the end of the war, women were encouraged to return to working in the home, yet the number of women in the workplace increased by a third between 1941 and 1951 (Collectif Clio 385). At the same time, the end of the Depression resulted in an increase of marriages, and Quebecc experienced the same "baby boom" as most of the rest of Canada and the United States. The Collectif Clio, a group of historians dedicated to telling the history of women in Quebecc, describe the conflicts resulting from the increased number of women working just as they were also encouraged to return to domesticity:

> La guerre avait réduit le chômage et les gens pouvaient de nouveau se marier. Dans la population catholique, les enfants suivent tôt après et la hausse du taux de naissances se fait sentir dès le début des années 40. Partout, les revues féminines glorifient cette redécouverte de la vie domestique. Les mécaniciennes du temps de la guerre doivent être dorénavant des mères de famille hors pair [. . .] L'hostilité des milieux cléricaux, nationaux, et intellectuels face au travail féminin ne réussit pas à garder toutes les épouses chez elles. (384-5)

The desire of women to continue working was met by an economic need, particularly among the working-class population; additionally, the increased urbanization of the province resulted in a shift in the types of jobs available as well as the skills required. It was no longer realistic for many families to earn their living by farming.

In his essay on Marie-Claire Blais's first two novels, philosopher and theorist Lucien Goldmann interprets *La Belle Bête* as modeling this tension of a changing province. He notes that the characters who do not evolve – such as the mother, Louise – represent a community that clings to its agrarian past (ie. the vision of Quebecc supported by Maurice Duplessis) but is destined to die. Louise owns a farm but by the end of the novel Isabelle-Marie, her ugly daughter who previously spends most of her time tending to the animals and the land, will have burned down the farm, thus destroying the symbol of Quebecc's past.[41] The problems of the past are personified by Patrice, Louise's handsome but stupid son, whose beauty is revered by his mother. By focusing solely on his appearance, Louise refuses to see the truth regarding the substance of Patrice (his stupidity). Even Patrice's sister, the ironically-named Isabelle-Marie cannot help but admire her brother's appearance while simultaneously resenting both him and her mother. Goldmann suggests that Isabelle-Marie symbolizes a new generation of "jeunes intellectuels franco-canadiens révoltés contre la société traditionnelle, haïssant sa mentalité et ses valeurs" (404). Blais's three main characters of this novel thus represent both Quebecc's past and its changing present. Because all three are destined to die, Quebecc's future, represented by Isabelle-Marie's daughter who is left alone, is uncertain at best.

Blais privileges Isabelle-Marie's perspective in her novel. Because of Louise's obvious (and in Isabelle-Marie's opinion, irrational) preference for Patrice, Isabelle-Marie is consumed with jealousy. Unlike the stepmother in the *Aurore* interpretations, Louise does not physically abuse her daughter, but rather, she ignores Isabelle-Marie while devoting herself entirely to her son. When Louise goes out of town for a few days, Isabelle-Marie deprives her brother of bread (a recurring symbol of maternal love and life throughout the novel) in an attempt to make him less handsome. She only succeeds in making him sick, but takes comfort in knowing that his

memory is too poor to recall her cruelty toward him. When Louise returns home, she is shocked to find Patrice ill, and promises to never leave him again. But she is now accompanied by a lover, Lanz, whom she eventually marries, and she has to divide her attention between both male objects of devotion. Experiencing jealousy (much like his sister) for the first time in his life, Patrice loathes Lanz and ends up killing him. Meanwhile, Isabelle-Marie meets and marries a young blind man, Michael, who believes her to be beautiful. His eyesight eventually returns, and he is shocked by the real appearance of his wife. When he realizes her physical ugliness as well as her lies, he leaves both his wife and their small daughter, Anne, who physically resembles Isabelle-Marie. At this point in the novel, the family dynamics and roles have returned to their normal state: Louise, now widowed, continues to adore her handsome son, while Isabelle-Marie (now rejected by her husband as well as by her mother) returns to work on the family farm. No longer able to control her fury, Isabelle-Marie realizes her desire to render her brother disfigured by submerging his face in boiling water. Once Patrice has become hideous, Louise allows herself to admit that her son is mentally deficient, and she sends him away to an asylum. Setting fire to the family land and home, Isabelle-Marie kills her mother and then throws herself under a train, leaving only her own daughter alive but lost and alone, and even uglier than she. Patrice escapes the asylum but when he sees that his home has been burned to the ground, he goes to the pond to find comfort in his own reflection; upon seeing his scalded face, he finally realizes his own ugliness and drowns. This extremely melodramatic ending to a depressing novel verges on Blais's satirical style developed in her second novel, *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*. While Blais's second novel ends on a potentially hopeful note, there is nothing optimistic about *La Belle Bête*.

The main characters and those who enter their lives in this novel can be grouped

into two triads:

Louise			Lanz
Patrice	Isabelle-Marie	first husband	Michael

The first, familial triangle is also a feminine one. Patrice, although male, is given stereotypically feminine characteristics. In addition to being weak in spirit and valued primarily for his beauty (attributes traditionally associated with women and girls), his nickname, "La Belle Bête" causes him to be designated grammatically as feminine: "Et la Belle Bête se nourrissait, dormait, souriait, ne cherchait rien, riait lorsqu'*elle* voyait les autres rire" (14 my emphasis).[42] This domestic triad is dominated by the intense feelings of hatred and jealousy of Isabelle-Marie and the adoration of Louise, feelings that differ from the more subtle emotions of Patrice. The first, familial triad is penetrated by three men by way of marriage, yet all three marriages fail. Goldmann suggests that these relationships represent the inability of Quebecc to succeed in its relations with anglophone Canada:

> Unis ou, plus exactement, mariés à la communauté canadienne-française traditionelle dans l'État canadien, ce mariage sera détruit d'une part, par l'action des intellectuels canadiens-français de la nouvelle génération qui refusent la perpétuation de l'ancien état des choses et, d'autre part, par le refus des intellectuels anglais de continuer l'union le jour où ils prennent conscience du vrai visage de cette nouvelle génération de Canadiens-français, de leurs exigences et de leurs aspirations. (406)

Michael rejects Isabelle-Marie once he sees her ugliness and her lies. Lanz is killed by Patrice because neither can bear to share Louise's attention. Neither man fulfils his role as a father; when Michael rejects Isabelle-Marie, he implicitly rejects their daughter as well. Lanz's neediness makes him as childlike as Patrice, and he shows no interest in acting as a father figure to Patrice or Isabelle-Marie. As for Louise's deceased first husband and the father of her

children, Blais provides little information about him except for the fact that Isabelle-Marie looks like him: "Isabelle-Marie ressemblait pourtant à son père, à son brave rêveur de père qui parlait de ses terres comme de filles élues de Dieu, en poète pur!" (22). Isabelle-Marie remembers her father as being emotionally and intellectually superior to Lanz but, like Lanz, he was mesmerized by the beauty and charms of Louise. All three of these men, therefore, valorize physical appearance above all else. Although Isabelle-Marie remembers her father fondly, she is puzzled by how he could have fallen for her superficial mother. Blais does not offer an explanation regarding why Louise, who is obsessed with beauty, married a presumably unattractive man, although the fact that Isabelle-Marie looks like him raises interesting questions: perhaps Louise resents her first husband (or his death), which would explain why she mistreats her daughter who resembles him physically.

The routine of this primary triad of characters (Isabelle-Marie hating her mother and feeling jealous of her brother, Louise coddling her son, and Patrice unaware of much other than his own beauty and the comfort of his mother's adoration) is disrupted by the arrivals of Lanz and Michael. Lanz, childlike and vain, resents the attention given to Patrice by Louise. To appease him, she devotes herself less and less to her son. Lanz relies emotionally upon Louise and physically upon his gold cane, which symbolizes both his dependence as well as his vanity. One evening, when Patrice enters his mother's bedroom at his usual time for affection and attention, he sees the cane and is filled with rage. He is now exiled from his mother's bedroom which used to be his place of comfort:

> Cette chambre n'avait plus, tout à coup, le même velours, les mêmes bras qui serrent et détendent. La canne d'or lui rappela Lanz [. . .] et aussi, la barbe de Lanz, les yeux de Lanz dont il se méfiait. Maintenant Patrice craignait presque de s'asseoir sur le bord du

lit. Il avait l'impression d'être écrasé par les murs. Tout était devenu autre. Il restait immobile, étourdi et mal à l'aise, au centre de la présence ennemie (39).

This other man has usurped his position as Louise's object of love. Isabelle-Marie explains to her brother what it means to be a husband: "Un mari, c'est un homme qu'une femme ne quitte pas. Tu comprends? C'est comme une mère. Maintenant Louise est la mère de Lanz" (51). These words force Patrice to realize that both he and Lanz are now the "sons" of Louise and he feels hatred and jealousy for the first time; these emotions, previously solely experienced by his sister, make him distressed and violent, until he is driven to running over Lanz with his horse. Louise tries to grab Lanz when she sees the horse running toward them, but she is only able to grab his gold cane, thus symbolically robbing Lanz of his support system. She knows that Patrice has purposefully killed Lanz, but she quickly forgives her son for his crime.

Blais blurs further the familial roles; not only does a wife act as a mother to her husband, but she behaves more like a wife or lover than a mother to her son. After Patrice kills Lanz, Louise promises him that no one will ever find out about his crime, and that even she is going to will herself to forget. She justifies his actions by realizing, as she tells him: "tu voulais être complètement mon fils, n'est-ce pas?" (95). These words reinforce Isabelle-Marie's explanation of what a wife is; both Lanz and Patrice are Louise's sons. The husband/son and wife/mother roles are further confused as Louise, realizing her own mortality due to cancer, tries to make Patrice promise to never leave her for a wife: "Je suis ta mère, ta meilleure campagne, je suis de toi, tu es de moi. Ne l'oublie pas" (117). Louise's obsession with her son's physique borders on incestuous adoration, and her concern that her son will leave her for a wife, just as a wife might fear being abandoned by a husband for another woman, further evokes the perverse aspects of this family. Each relationship lacks traditional boundaries. The only adult male character in this

novel, Lanz, is needy and more like a son to his wife than a husband. Blais characterizes the relationships of both romantic couples in this text (Lanz and Louise, Michael and Isabelle-Marie) as childlike and illusionary.

As Patrice feels jealousy for the first time, Isabelle-Marie experiences happiness and love for the first time with Michael. Their relationship, however, is dependent upon her lies. As soon as she meets him, she realizes: "Seul un aveugle pouvait la 'voir' belle. Elle résolut donc de jouer à être belle pour lui" (47). Although young adults, their courting rituals are described as platonic "jeux" – they run and chase each other while playing games: "Ils ne pensaient ni à la chair ni au désir. Ils avaient tout l'espace pour jouer et courir" (75). The frivolity of their relationship reinforces its status as make-believe for Isabelle-Marie who supports Michael's obsession with beauty: "'Est-elle belle Isa aujourd'hui?' 'Étincelante.'"(98). When Michael regains his eyesight and sees his wife for the first time, Blais describes his reaction as horrified shock: "Reculant d'horreur devant celle qu'il avait tant aimée 'belle,' fou de désespoir, il hurlait: 'Menteuse! Menteuse!" (103). His horrified reaction implies that Isabelle-Marie not simply unattractive but monstrous in appearance. After being rejected by her husband, Isabelle-Marie's temporary happiness ceases and her feelings of jealousy and resentment of her brother returns: "Plus elle se croyait laide et abaissée, plus elle songeait à reprendre l'injuste beauté de son frère" (105). As for Patrice, with his sister once again at home and his mother able to devote herself entirely to him, he feels happy and calm because the original family dynamics have returned.

One other character finds himself in this drama: Patrice's companion in the asylum, Faust (his name emphasizes the social transgressions characterized by everyone living in the institution). Faust is the first and only friend that Patrice has ever had, as Louise has kept Patrice isolated. Faust constantly play-acts, and by imitating the burned facial features of Patrice, he

serves as a sort of mirror for Patrice, thus comforting him.[43] Mirrors are comforting to Patrice as they have always reassured him of his beauty and thus, of his existence. Mirrors are not as comforting to Patrice, however, as Louise's shoulder. From the very beginning of the novel, Patrice continuously seeks comfort from his mother's shoulder. The second sentence of the novel describes Patrice with his "tête renversée sur l'épaule de sa mère" (11). Blais presents two examples of physical comfort: for Patrice, his mother's shoulder represents love and comfort, whereas for Louise, her son's face represents beauty and hope. After Lanz hits Patrice and demands that he obey him, Louise is relieved that Lanz has only injured Patrice's shoulder and not his face while Patrice seeks comfort immediately from his mother's shoulder: "Louise vit avec satisfaction que [Lanz] n'avait pas touché au visage, que seul l'épaule était meurtrie. Elle se jeta contre son fils. Patrice pleura sur son épaule" (62). Patrice's injured shoulder contrasts with the comforting shoulder of Louise. Louise is relieved that Patrice's face is left untouched. As the novel progresses, however, Louise's cancer is ravaging her own face. As the cancer weakens her body, Patrice is aware that she is not able to hold his head against her as often, yet "il accompagnait sa mère, la tête éternellement contre son épaule" (119). In the asylum, Faust dies and Patrice attempts to go home, in order to find once more solace and companionship at his mother's shoulder. There, he discovers the remains of the burnt farm, runs to his pond to gaze at his reflection as he used to for comfort, becomes cognizant of his grotesque face, and drowns.

Louise refuses to acknowledge weakness; she is in denial about her own physical weakness and also the weakness of Patrice's intellect. Her face is slowly eaten away by a cancer that Blais describes to her readers and that Isabelle-Marie observes silently. Patrice does not notice his mother's physical changes, and Louise also remains in a state of denial about her own illness: "[Louise] parlait inlassablement et Patrice ne voyait pas la nervure au visage maternel, le

lierre effrayant qui s'agrippait à la chair comme une griffe, salissant la peau blanche, un peu plus, chaque jour" (35). Once Louise finally goes to a doctor and is diagnosed with cancer, she is devastated but stays in denial about her physical status by covering her cheek with make-up several times a day. As for Patrice's mental status, Louise dismisses the claims of hired tutors that Patrice is an idiot, and interprets his silence as profound thoughts:

> Ce matin, elle demanda: "Tu es triste [. . .] À quoi penses-tu?" Il sourit, haussa les épaules et son sourire lui monta aux yeux, assombrissant le blanc de ses paupières. "Je ne pense à rien, mère." Elle rit: "Ah! Mon grand, tu ne me dis pas la vérité." Mais il disait la vérité. (19-20)

Isabelle-Marie is frustrated by her mother's refusal to see the stupidity of her brother, but although she is jealous of Patrice, she does not resent him consistently. Her nickname for him, "La Belle Bête," is sometimes expressed with affection. When she attempts to take away his beauty by depriving him of food, she eventually feels pity for him: "Après tout, il vaut au moins une bête" (25). Even Patrice, vaguely aware of his own mental weakness, identifies with the animals he observes: "Il éprouvait vaguement qu'il était de même race que ces 'belles bêtes.' Il mordait comme elles et gémissait à leur façon puisqu'il ne pouvait s'exprimer en homme, puis il s'acharnait aux courses avec le même optimisme physique des bêtes" (88). Blais compares Patrice also to Adonis, and the frequent image of him bent over his own reflection in a pond recalls Narcissus; these mythological evocations reinforce Patrice's own uncertain status as neither a child nor a man, and incapable of anything more than rudimentary instincts and thoughts.

Unlike the innocent and completely victimized Aurore, Isabelle-Marie's own cruel actions prevent readers from sympathizing with her. She blames her mother for her own

ugliness: "'N'est-ce pas toi qui m'a faite si laide?'" (151) but by that logic, Isabelle-Marie is to blame for her daughter's ugliness as well. Isabelle-Marie clearly hates her mother, but she also enjoys feeling superior to both Louise and Patrice: "Isabelle-Marie était presque heureuse d'être si différente de Patrice et de Louise" (18). She refers to Lanz and Louise as "poupées" (57) without souls, and sees them as "pleins de vices, répugnants" (57) whereas she finds herself to be "un être de pureté instinctive" (58). But this "purity" is tainted by her feelings of hatred toward her mother and her vengeance on her brother, particularly given that her intention was to cause pain not to Patrice, the victim, but to Louise. Patrice, is the real victim of this story despite the fact that he murders Lanz. His animalistic instincts render him indeed a beast, but Blais suggests that he could have learned to control his impulsive hatred of Lanz if Louise had not focused solely on Patrice's physical appearance, but had attended to his emotional and intellectual development as well.

Blais condemns all her characters in this novel to appear disfigured when they die: Lanz is mangled by the horse, Louise's face is ravaged by cancer and she is burnt in her house, Patrice's face has been destroyed by the boiling water, and Isabelle-Marie has always been disfigured due to her ugliness. When Isabelle-Marie plunges Patrice's face in boiling water, Louise feels immediately repulsed by her son and Isabelle-Marie finally explains to Patrice: "tu vois, ta mère ne t'a jamais aimé" (123). Blais creates no transition between Louise's feelings toward her son; her emotions shift instantly from adoration to disappointed indifference. Once Louise learns that it was Isabelle-Marie who disfigured Patrice, she expels her from the house. Isabelle-Marie finally confronts her mother in a cathartic diatribe: "Mère, depuis que je suis enfant, je te vois chérir Patrice parce qu'il est beau et me mépriser, moi, la laide. [. . .] Tu ne m'as jamais aimée et tu n'as pas su que ton fils était un idiot, une bête" (131). Kicked out of

the family home, Isabelle leaves Louise in solitude. With her son no longer beautiful and her body weakened by cancer, Louise has only her farm to comfort her, and Blais continues to emphasize Louise's denial about her health: "'Bien sûr je suis riche.' Mais sa vieille bouche nageait dans le pus" (153). It had always been Isabelle-Marie who took care of the lands and who tended to the farm animals, but she seeks revenge on her mother by setting fire to these lands. As for her own daughter, Anne, even uglier than herself, Isabelle-Marie is at once revolted by her appearance yet also feels tenderness toward her. Isabelle-Marie knows that her daughter will have a hard life and is even tempted to kill her in order to save her from this suffering. Anne speaks matter-of-factly of her own ugliness. When Louise addresses Anne as "Ma belle enfant," presumably as a meaningless term of affection, Anne rejects this description: "'Je ne suis pas belle' dit l'enfant, avec douceur" (130). Perhaps already aware of the importance of her own appearance, "[Anne] n'avait pas envie [. . .] de jouer et, peut-être pas, de vivre" (133). Despite Isabelle-Marie's evolved status as mother, Blais continues to present her primarily as a daughter by maintaining her preoccupation with her own relationship with Louise. Neither Blais-as-narrator nor Isabelle-Marie give Anne much attention; the birth of her own daughter does not lessen Isabelle-Marie's focus on and resentment of her relationship with her mother. After setting fire to her mother's farm, Isabelle-Marie throws herself under a train to kill herself, leaving Anne – the future of Quebecc – alive but alone. By "killing" the land, Isabelle-Marie is destroying Quebecc's traditional, agrarian society; she kills her mother too in the fire, but her mother, representing Quebecc's old values, was dying of cancer anyway. The importance of appearance in this society gives no reason to believe that Anne, herself also ugly, will survive, much less thrive. If Louise represents traditional Québécois values and Isabelle-Marie represents a new "intellectual" generation, then Anne symbolizes Quebecc's bleak future.

Many parallels can be drawn between Blais's *La Belle Bête* and Hébert's *Le Torrent*. At the time of its publication, just after World War Two, many readers interpreted *Le Torrent* as an allegory of the condition of the Québécois people. In an article describing the influence of this text, Neil Bishop claims: "Parmi les intellectuels québécois, force motrice de la Révolution tranquille, nombreux sont ceux pour qui la lecture du *Torrent* fut un moment capital dans leur prise de conscience d'une aliénation collective et la nécessité de prendre en main leur destin de nation au lieu de subir comme une fatalité" (131). Hébert herself, however, has denied this sort of interpretation, stating in an interview: "Je m'étonne quand la critique décrit *Le Torrent* comme le symbole du Quebecc enchaîné. [. . .] Il faudrait plutôt s'interroger sur la fonction de la mère, de la religion, ce sont les problèmes essentiels du moins en ce qui me concerne" (quoted in Vanasse 446).

Unlike *La Belle Bête* which is written in the third-person narrative, *Le Torrent* is written in the first-person which allows the reader to identify with the protagonist, François. Although in *La Belle Bête*, the point of view of Isabelle-Marie dominates, Blais's narrator indicates the other characters' perceptions and feelings. For example: "Louise supportait ses regards fielleux, perçants de haine, des regards qui ne tranchaient ainsi que dans les yeux de sa fille. Elle avait appris à s'y résigner, ainsi qu'à des châtiments intimes" (20). Louise tolerates her daughter's glares; it is not suggested here or anywhere else that she hates her daughter (although she certainly favors Patrice up until the very moment when his face becomes scalded). Isabelle-Marie's opinion is justified because it is so adamant and dominates the text, but there are details that counter her beliefs. On the other hand, in Hébert's story, the first-person narrative brings the readers into the world of her young protagonist throughout the entire text from the first sentence: "J'étais un enfant dépossédé du monde" (19). François lives with his mother in a remote area.

She only speaks to him when giving him lessons or while yelling at him when he is in trouble, and she beats him regularly. Otherwise, they work from morning until night on their farm. As an isolated child, François becomes desperate to see another human being, so he runs away and meets "l'homme horrible," a filthy, monstrous man who recognizes Claudine and makes François aware of his mother's past. His first experience with another human being forces him to realize that it is not merely within the confines of his home that people are scary. Claudine controls every aspect of her son's life; she decides that he will become a priest, but at school he experiences a *prise de conscience* when he observes his classmates and recognizes that his mother has prevented him from knowing how to be happy. He then asserts his independence by announcing to her that he will not return to school. Claudine's response is to beat François on the head with a set of keys, which renders him deaf. François later kills his mother and then lives alone in the family house until he meets two vagabonds, a man and a woman, who have been camping on his property. He gives the man money in exchange for the woman, whom he names "Amica" and who comes to live with him. François becomes increasingly overcome with feelings of despair, due to the nearby torrent of water that he "hears" constantly. This torrent eventually drives François to drown himself.

The comments made by "l'homme horrible" inform the readers that François was born out of wedlock, and that Claudine had to isolate herself in order to hide herself and her illegitimate child. She therefore resents her son. Both Blais and Hébert create worlds in which the mothers resent their children; both Isabelle-Marie and François are unloved children yet Hébert's protagonist François has more in common with Patrice (the (superficially) adored child) than with Isabelle-Marie. While Patrice lacks intellect, François lacks hearing. Both of these deficiencies are blamed on their mothers' cruelty; Patrice's mother teaches him only to nurture

his beauty while ignoring his intellect, and François becomes deaf after Claudine beats him on the head. Additionally, both boys are kept confined from other people; while Louise wants to keep Patrice all to herself, Claudine isolates both herself and her son. Until his encounter with "l'homme horrible," François has never seen an entire human face other than his own reflection in the water because he is too afraid of his mother to look her in the eyes: "Nous étions toujours seuls. J'allais avoir bientôt douze ans et n'avais pas encore contemplé un visage humain, si ce n'est le reflet mouvant de mes propres traits, lorsque l'été je me penchais pour boire aux ruisseaux. Quant à ma mère, seul le bas de sa figure m'était familier. Mes yeux n'osaient monter plus haut" (21). Both François and Patrice depend on bodies of water to reflect their own images to themselves. Blais and Hébert have their characters depend upon elements of nature (ponds) to reassure themselves of their existence. An additional similarity between Patrice, François and also Isabelle-Marie is their murderous trait; all three kill those who have made them so miserable. While Isabelle-Marie sets fire to her mother's house to burn her to death, both boys use horses as tools to kill; Patrice runs over Lanz and François runs over Claudine. Finally, both Patrice and François end their own lives by drowning.[44]

One essential theme that pervades the entire text of *Le Torrent* is scarcely present in *La Belle Bête*, although it does play an important role in the *Aurore* novel and film: religion. While her religion classifies Claudine and her offspring as sinners, Claudine plans to redeem herself from her "sin" by having her son become a priest: "François, je retournerai au village, la tête haute. Tous s'inclineront devant moi. J'aurai vaincu! [. . .] Tu es mon fils. Tu combattras l'instinct mauvais, jusqu'à la perfection. Tu seras prêtre! Le respect! Le respect, quelle victoire sur eux tous!" (26). In *La Norme et les Déviantes*, Lévesque notes that in this Catholic society, "illegitimate" children were seen as emblematic of women's sinfulness:

> L'exercice prémarital et la naissance d'un enfant sans famille parce que sans père menaçaient de bouleverser l'ordre familial, fondement de la société québécoise. Une naissance qu'on situait en dehors de la légitimité témoignait de l'échec de la surveillance des filles, de leur liberté dans un domaine ou justement il ne fallait pas être libre, et créait un drame dont les actrices ne pouvaient trouver place sur la scène familiale. (120)

Hébert emphasizes that François's education has been centered especially on the need for self-control, in order to redeem his mother's "sin." He observes that his mother practices self-discipline by working non-stop. He learns that she beats him whenever her work is interrupted and for this reason she remains constantly busy: "Un certain lundi, elle devait mettre des draps à blanchir sur l'herbe; et je me souviens que brusquement il s'est mis à pleuvoir. En date de ce même lundi, j'ai donc vu que cette étrange femme avait rayé: 'Blanchir les draps,' et ajouté dans la marge: 'Battre François'" (21). There is no real reason behind Claudine's acts of violence, and despite his isolation, François understands that this behavior is "étrange." However, he also recognizes a moment where his mother becomes weak in terms of her own self-discipline; after telling François about the role of priests, comparing them to martyrs and victims such as Jesus, François begins to sob and observes: "Ma mère faillit se jeter sur moi" (26). However, she quickly catches this impulse toward maternal comfort and she returns to her cold, unloving demeanor. This small but significant detail hints at the potential for maternal love that has been destroyed by societal beliefs and religious mores. In addition to Hébert's emphasis of violent punishments and the need for self-control, the key terms that François associates with religion include: "les mots de 'châtiment,' 'justice de Dieu,' 'damnation,' 'enfer,' 'discipline,' 'péché originel'" (20) reinforce the author's criticism of the negative aspects of religion. At

school, François isolates himself from his classmates, works on the farm as his only "recreational" activity (as prescribed by his mother), and self-imposes penitence whenever he feels regret for being so lonely, as he has been taught to associate these feelings with "weakness." François' religious education is associated with his solitude and sadness as well as the with the violence of his mother.

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Hébert describes Claudine as having superhuman abilities. Claudine's characteristics surpass the masculine traits of the stepmother in the *Aurore* film and novel. Rather, her large size and powerful strength are emphasized to such an extent that she does not appear mortal to her son. François only learns of her first name when he meets "l'homme horrible" who addresses her as "la Grande Claudine" (24). François is struck when he realizes that his mother has a first name and a history that precludes his own existence; before this encounter, she has appeared to him an omnipresent and omniscient being. When Claudine attacks "l'homme horrible," the image of her is that of an omnipotent being as well: "Ma mère était debout, immense, à la lisière du bois, latrique toute frémissante à la main, l'homme étendu à ses pieds" (25). After encountering the strange man, François is humiliated to learn that his mother has guessed his secret desire to see another human being: "Au comble du trouble de voir que ma mère avait pu devenir un secret que je ne lui ai jamais confié, je levai les yeux sur elle, semblable à quelqu'un qui a perdu tout contrôle de soi" (25). Not only does she beat her son and otherwise control him physically, but François cannot even enjoy the freedom of his own personal thoughts. After Claudine beats her son to the point of deafness, they avoid each other for an entire summer. Despite this avoidance, François remarks that "pas une de mes minutes de paresses devant le travail ni une seule de mes flâneries au bord des chutes ou ailleurs ne lui demeuraient inconnues" (35). What this all-knowing woman cannot control, however, is their

horse Perceval. After François kills Claudine by crushing her with this horse, Hébert once again emphasizes François's astonishment of her immense size: "Je la regarde. Je mesure son envergure terrassée. Elle était immense, marquée de sang et d'empreintes incrustées" (37). Perceval ("ce démon"), represents the devil in opposition to the god-like Claudine.

Hébert depicts Claudine as an anti-maternal figure whose actions toward her son are never kind: "Voilà l'univers maternel dans lequel j'appris, si tôt, la dureté et le refus" (21). François resents her expectations of him. She wants him to become a priest in order to gain respect in a society from which she has alienated herself. When he goes to school, she gives him her old school books and he is fascinated by her name written on the first page of each of them, once again reminding him that she has a past and a human identity. As she writes his name over hers, she is confirming that he is part of her:

> Elle s'empara du livre. Un instant le "Claudine" écrit en lettres hautes et volontaires capta toute la lumière, puis il disparut et je vis venir à la place, tracé de la même calligraphie altière: 'François.' Un 'François' en encre fraîche, accolé au 'Perrault' de vieille encre. Et ainsi dans ce rayon étroit, en l'espace de quelques minutes, les mains longues jouèrent et scellèrent mon destin. [. . .] Cette phrase de ma mère me martelait la tête: 'Tu es mon fils. Tu me continues.' (27)

François realizes that Claudine has chosen his destiny for him, and that his life will be a continuation of her own unhappiness. This recalls Louise's desperate plea to Patrice in *La Belle Bête* ("je suis de toi, tu es de moi. Ne l'oublie pas" (117)). François's revelation hat his life will never get better, as well as his observances of his happy classmates at school prompts him to take control of his own life by revolting and rejecting his mother's control: 'Je ne retournerai pas au collège, l'année prochaine,' prononçai-je si nettement que je croyais entendre la voix d'un autre.

C'était la voix d'un homme" (31). Just as Isabelle-Marie confronts her mother with the truth of her feelings in Blais's novel, François stands up to his mother. Both confrontations, however, have negative consequences. Isabelle-Marie is kicked out by her mother, and will return to burn down the house, the land, and her mother, before she kills herself. As François hears himself speaking with the voice of an adult man, Claudine, who had previously been depicted as an immense god-like figure, transforms into an uncontrollable beast: "Ma mère bondit comme une tigresse [. . .] Son visage était tout défait, presque hideux" (32). She beats him with a set of keys; due to his ensuing deafness, François will never again have the ability to hear his own voice and he becomes controlled instead by the torrent of water nearby. The sound of the torrent eventually drives him to kill himself.

Hébert depicts Claudine as a powerful but cold woman. When François runs away in hope of finding another human being, he expresses the desire to meet a man: "Je résolus d'aller à la rencontre d'un homme, n'osant espérer un enfant et me promettant de fuir si c'était une femme" (22). His wish is granted; he comes across a man, but the man is filthy and scares François as he is grabbed by "l'homme horrible." François is let down, therefore, by both men and women; François's expectations of and disappointment with both genders suggest that kindness is universally rare. Both his mother, and Amica, the gypsy woman he buys from the vagabond squatting on his property, appear to François as not quite human. In Hébert's story where everyone is controlled by someone or something else, François attempts to control Amica in order to overcome his overly-controlled childhood. Although he has bought her, he realizes that he cannot possess or own Amica. While Claudine appears to him as superhuman with her immense size and strength, both she and Amica are characterized as possessing animalistic characteristics as well as mind-reading capabilities. While Claudine, in her fit of rage, appears

tiger-like, Amica reminds François of a cat that he used to observe always watching him. Amica's eyes and cat-like movements bother François as he imagines that Amica must be constantly watching him, even as he sleeps. François panics when he believes that Amica, like his mother, can understand his thoughts. One night, when François feels agitated, Amica brings him some water without having been asked to do so, and this proves to him that Amica, like his mother, understands his thoughts:

> Tout à coup la panique s'empare de moi, à une certaine révélation que j'ai. Je ne croyais pas avoir ouvert la bouche, mais seulement désiré mentalement avoir de l'eau. Amica fait signe que oui et m'aide à boire comme un enfant [. . .] Je possède donc la certitude que je ne conserve aucune maitrise de ma voix. Je ne sais si je parle haut ou si je continue mon monologue intérieur. Amica peut lire mes pensées. Mon cerveau est à découvert devant elle. Je n'avais pas imaginé ce comble à mon horreur. (52)

Just as his mother knew François's secret desires and whereabouts, Amica can understand his thoughts. Furthermore, Hébert emphasizes that François has not successfully reached adult status; Amica still helps him to drink water like a child. François realizes that despite his mother's death, he still has no control over his life or over the life of Amica. His deafness prevents him from knowing whether his "monologue intérieur" is private or if he is accidentally speaking aloud. Whether he is speaking or whether Amica can read his thoughts, he is vulnerable. His actions are driven by the torrent that he constantly "hears" until he is driven to drown himself in the water that has tortured him. Although he was aware of the torrent's power before his mother's death, François is increasingly controlled by the water's rhythm. Hébert implies that Claudine is linked to the torrent in a *mère/mer* embodiment, and that she is a part of nature, reaffirming her god-like qualities.

Both Blais and Hébert, as well as the *Aurore* novelist and filmmakers create worlds in which their protagonists are unable to communicate with others. François is never able to communicate with any person. As a child, the only time he speaks is during his lessons at home. When he goes to school, he does not allow himself to socialize with his classmates and spends his free-time working. He succeeds academically, but he has no friends. At the end of the school year, when he observes his classmates laughing and getting ready to leave, a classmate asks François to help him fasten his suitcase. François takes pleasure in hearing the voice of someone addressing him directly, but he cannot react, as never before had someone spoken to him as a peer. His classmate interprets François' silence and refusal to help as a snub, but François has simply not learned how to socialize. After he becomes deaf, he has no control over his voice or his speech, and after the death of Claudine, he does not see anybody until he meets Amica and the other man on his property: "J'interpelle ces gens. Aucune réaction quelconque de leur part. Depuis le temps que je n'ai adressé la parole à qui que ce soit, si je ne savais plus parler? Je crie, je hurle. Je ne sais quels mots s'échappent de mon gosier" (40). He tries to speak with Amica and the man on François' property, but they do not react to his words. Hébert suggests that François cannot speak meaningfully, or perhaps even produce sounds, which emphasizes his perpetual state as a helpless child; even after his mother's death, Claudine still controls him. Likewise, the characters in *La Belle Bête* do not communicate fully with others. For example, Patrice is kept away from other children, and he never socializes with anyone. Both he and his sister spend most of their time with animals. Isabelle-Marie's only romantic relationship works momentarily only because she lies and her husband is blind. In the *Aurore* novel and film, Aurore is too scared to tell her father or others about her stepmother's abuse until it is too late; the neighbors, too, fret without action. The underlying fear that prevents

these characters from speaking freely can be illustrated by Adrienne Rich's well-known statement:

> Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language - this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 199)

Everyone in these texts is afraid to express his or her fears, rage, or concern, which recalls the repressive nature of the *grande noirceur* era.

Joan Manheimer, in her article on the "Terrible Mother" in Victorian novels, claims that "the destructive maternal character often possesses revolutionary energy" (530). Manheimer reminds us that the Good Mother ("The Angel in the House" archetype in Victorian literature) served a political and economical purpose (as does the "guardian of the hearth" figure in Québécois literature). Similarly, she argues that authors often treat the Terrible Mother with ambivalence because they often serve to reveal problems of society.[45] We can apply this notion to these Québécois texts as well. Aurore's stepmother is unequivocally cruel, but both the novel and film suggest that fathers should take a more active role in caring for their children. The institution of the Catholic Church is also criticized through these texts' depictions of the ineffectual priests. In the novels written by Hébert and Blais, while not sympathetic characters, the mothers are not cruel to the same extent as Aurore's stepmother. Claudine can be interpreted as a victim of a repressive society. Being strict and abusive of François, while extreme, is a (somewhat) understandable reaction to being "punished" by an unforgiving community. In Blais's novel, Louise is constantly accused of being hateful toward her daughter, but Isabelle-

Marie is not without fault herself. Her jealousy and resentment drive her to lie, hurt, and murder. The fairy-tale title of *La Belle Bête* (with its most obvious allusion to *Beauty and the Beast* (*La Belle et la Bête* in French) belies its ugly content.

In *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebecc National Text*, Green notes that: "While the *roman de la terre* had historically told of the transmission of the land from father to son, *Le Torrent* and *La Belle Bête* depicted a violent rupture in the traditional continuity and a rejection of the heritage, seeming to envision the radical changes soon to take place in the society beyond the text" (79). These violent and dysfunctional family relationships can also be interpreted as a metaphor for a particularly repressive era within Quebecc's history. Both texts introduce a rupture in traditional writing and, especially, in traditional depictions of the family, and in particular, of the mother. None of the texts studied here include traditional depictions of parent-child relationships; the violence within them, while extreme, shows a facet of reality (child abuse) that often goes unspoken, and is certainly underrepresented in literary works. The ugliness within the texts by the *Aurore* author and filmmakers, Blais, and Hébert reveals an disturbing vision of life in Quebecc during the *grande noirceur* era.

Chapter 3

Les Grossesses of Michel Tremblay's *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte*

For nearly a half-century, Michel Tremblay has remained one of Quebecc's most famous and prolific authors. Tremblay is perhaps best known for his play *Les Belles-sœurs* (1968) which shocked some critics with its use of joual, the variation of spoken French associated specially with Montreal's working-class population that marks Tremblay's play as specifically Québécois. Tremblay's works, focusing often on family relationships, usually feature working-class women (*Les Belles-sœurs*, for example, has a cast of 15 women and no men), and often homosexual characters (such as in *Hosanna*). Tremblay's novel, *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte* (1978), focuses on family life in World War Two era Montreal. This novel also sparks the creation of an entire series (*Les Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*), which continues the development of many of the characters introduced in *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceint*e. Several of the characters in this novel had already been featured in Tremblay's earlier works, such as *Les Belles-sœurs*. In his article "Michel Tremblay: An Interweave of Prose and Drama," Pierre Gobin refers to the phenomenon of characters appearing in multiple texts as Tremblay's "internal intertextuality," which refers to Tremblay's creative "reactivation of elements drawn from the same corpus" (107). Tremblay notes that the inspiration for *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte* (1978) came from him choosing to take his characters from his plays and develop them further decades later: "J'essayais de comprendre comment ces personnages étaient devenus les monstres qu'ils sont dans mes pièces" (Boulanger 93). Tremblay has acknowledged that the living situation of the characters in this novel is based upon the household in which he was raised: "Je décris le seul milieu que j'ai jamais connu, le milieu que j'aime, le milieu d'où je

viens. [. . .] On était trois familles dans la même maison: treize dans sept pièces" (cited in Gingras 26). Critics have observed other autobiographical elements in *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte*, suggesting that the titular character, "la grosse femme," represents Tremblay's own mother. The fact that la grosse femme is never given any specific first name throughout the novel supports this notion. Additionally, the novel takes place in May 1942, and la grosse femme is pregnant and due to give birth soon; Tremblay was born in June, 1942. Tremblay has spoken about the influence of his mother in his own life and upon his work. Despite the fact that she died in 1963, the year before Tremblay's first success as a playwright (he won a contest sponsored by Radio-Canada), she continued to serve as a source of inspiration:

> Et mon mentor, c'est ma mère. Elle m'a tout donné: mon sens critique, mon côté comique et mélodramatique, mon penchant pour l'exagération . . . Avant que je ne devienne dramaturge, ma mère m'a donc transmis l'essence de la théâtralité. Mais parfois, je pense que ma mère est partie pour mon bien. Quand j'ai commencé à écrire, ma mère a eu l'élégance de se retirer sur la pointe des pieds. (cited in Boulanger 65)[46]

Mothers and mother-child relationships are privileged in *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte*. Although each mother in this text feels differently about motherhood and her relationship with her children, the children (whether they are young or adults themselves), particularly the sons, adore their mothers. In this novel, Tremblay celebrates the complexities of mother-child relationships, pregnancy, and working-class family life.

As becomes quickly apparent in this novel, almost every female character of child-bearing age is seven or eight months along in pregnancy. The exceptions are the prostitutes (Mercedes and Béatrice), the celibate restaurant-owner (Marie-Sylvia), the waitress (Françoise) and Albertine, la grosse femme's sister-in-law and the only woman featured in this novel whose

husband is away at war. A recurring accusation made of the husbands of these pregnant women is that they have impregnated their wives with the intention of avoiding going to war. While the eligible men are overseas, risking their lives fighting, la grosse femme is risking her own life by being pregnant despite her age (she is 42 years old) and obesity. Tremblay emphasizes that each of the pregnant women in this text are participating in the war in their own way: by intentionally or unintentionally protecting their husbands:

> Pas d'adolescents. Pas de jeunes hommes. Ou presque. Les quelques hommes jeunes qui sillonnaient la rue Mont-Royal, cet après-midi là, le faisaient au bras de leurs femmes enceintes, alibis de leur présence au pays en temps de guerre, garanties de leur honnêteté et, surtout, de leur innocence. Abandonner une femme enceinte pour aller courailler dans les vieux pays? Jamais! (153-4).

Despite a constant awareness of the violence taking place overseas, life continues forTremblay's fictional family and neighborhood. The novel takes place during a single day during which every major character undergoes a significant and life-altering experience or interaction. The exception is la grosse femme herself, the only character to be content with her life, her body and her family. Among the various relationships in this novel, Tremblay emphasizes those between mothers and their children, and he focuses on the women's different responses to their own pregnancies. By the end of the novel, it is clear that the need to communicate openly is what drives each character to change; la grosse femme is the key advocate for more communication.

In what appears to be a nod to the classic *romans du terroir* that focus on an entire family rather than a single individual, Tremblay includes several different storylines in his novel. However, the home and the family of la grosse femme are central. In her household, several different generations of a family reside together. Victoire is grandmother to the youngest

children and mother to Édouard, Albertine, and Gabriel. Albertine is married to Paul, who remains away at war during the entire novel (their children are Thérèse, eleven, and Marcel, four). Gabriel is married to la grosse femme who is pregnant; they have two sons (Richard, eleven, and Philippe, eight). Tremblay opens the novel at the beginning the day with a detailed description of life at home, which also introduces his readers to the varied dynamics between the mothers (Victoire, Albertine, and la grosse femme) and their children. Tremblay details the crowded sleeping arrangements that indicate the family's economic (working class) status (Richard shares a room with both his uncle Édouard and his grandmother Victoire; cousins Thérèse and Philippe sleep together on a couch). Tremblay's depiction of the morning rituals of interactions involving the need to urinate emphasizes the lack of privacy in this over-occupied home and introduces some of the rapports between the various family members: Édouard beats his niece Thérèse in their race to the bathroom; Marcel urinates into the sink with the help of his older sister; Albertine helps her bedridden sister-in-law (la grosse femme) use a bed pan). Despite the normalcy of these daily routines, Tremblay implies quickly that this day is atypical: Édouard prepares breakfast for everyone for the first time, and the typically grouchy Albertine attempts to be pleasant and kind.

The motivation behind Albertine's efforts to behave nicely results from an earlier discussion with her daughter, Thérèse, who has requested that Albertine yell less in front of Thérèse's young brother Marcel as Albertine's hysterical sobs and extreme frustration scare him. This requires a complete change in Albertine's demeanor, which affects Marcel instantly: "Étonné de voir sa mère si douce tout à coup, Marcel la regardait comme s'il ne l'avait jamais vue, pris entre son envie de pleurer causée par la colère d'Albertine et le besoin de se blottir dans ses bras parce qu'il l'aimait au delà de toute raison, au delà même de la peur" (36-37). While

Marcel loves his mother unconditionally (despite her normally cross disposition), his older sister has less patience for Albertine's temper. Already at just 11 years old, Thérèse realizes that she no longer fears her mother, even when Albertine becomes hysterical and screams. Indeed, she feels at times indifferent and even hateful toward Albertine: "Sa mère ne lui faisait plus peur depuis longtemps et ses sautes d'humeur la laissaient indifférente [. . .] non, pas tout à fait [. . .] les sautes d'humeur de sa mère commençaient à réveiller en elle un sentiment inconnu qu'elle ne comprenait pas encore mais qui la remplissait d'une joie morne, mal définie, presque malsaine: le mépris" (38). In order to assert her independence, Thérèse argues with her mother as an equal. In his description of their fights, Tremblay, for both mother and daughter, uses the term "femme," reinforcing their equality as women: "Les deux femmes se jetaient tout à la figure, se battaient littéralement, Thérèse répondant aux claques de sa mère par des coups de poing, à ses cris par des hurlements, à ses reproches par des malédictions. Thérèse était minuscule à côté d'Albertine, mais on sentait que cette dernière avait quand même peur de sa fille" (73). Despite her young age, Thérèse has learned to stand up for herself to such an extent that her mother fears and obeys her to the point of altering her behavior in front of Marcel.

Albertine is resented both by her daughter (Thérèse) and by her mother (Victoire). Victoire is not permitted either by her daughter, Albertine or by her daughter-in-law (la grosse femme) to assist with the domestic tasks at home: "[Victoire] aurait voulu descendre les vidanges, faire le souper, laver la grosse femme, faire tremper tous les rideaux de la maison dans la baignoire, rosser Philippe ou Thérèse, ou Richard, ou Marcel, mais rosser quelqu'un" (34). Whenever Victoire attempts to help with one of these tasks, she is met with protests from Albertine or la grosse femme, who often note that she is too old, too "boîteuse," and that she has already worked too much in her long life. Victoire argues with Albertine and Édouard because

she is frustrated at being refused the opportunity to do anything in the house. Tremblay's descriptions of the daily arguments in the overcrowded house create an ambiance of pandemonium. Plunging his readers immediately into this boisterous family, Tremblay forces an effort on the part of each reader to keep track of each character and perhaps experience a parallel feeling of chaos.

Despite their queen-like names and their position as eldest member of a multi-generational home, Tremblay's grandmother character, Victoire, contrasts with the portrait of the grandmother, Antoinette, in Marie-Claire Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (1965). Whereas Blais's Antoinette reigns over the household and the children, and in fact holds commanding power regarding all household matters, Tremblay's Victoire is treated as a helpless woman by her children.[47] Tremblay, however, alludes to her queen-like potential by his use of the verb "trôner:" "Victoire trônait toujours à la même place, au beau milieu de la table" (34). In Blais's novel, Antoinette is described as almost superhuman: "Immense, souveraine, elle semblait diriger le monde de son fauteuil" (7). Even the newborn Emmanuel observes her in deference, looking down at her feet (described as "nobles et pieux" 7) before daring to work his way up to her face. While Antoinette truly reigns over her family in Blais's text, leading the household in all religious, educational, and domestic tasks without resistence from her daughter or son-in-law (to whom these duties would normally fall). The mother in this novel but is too worn out from the physical work she does alongside her husband to protest Antoinette's leadership. In Tremblay's novel, Victoire's age and physical disability are used by her family members as excuses to prevent her from holding any influence or leadership in the house. The grandchildren of both of these women have mixed feelings toward their grandmothers. In Blais's novel, Antoinette is strict, and causes fear in some of the children: "Grand-Mère

Antoinette était si immense qu'[Emmanuel] ne la voyait pas en entier. Il avait peur" (8). She can also be physically rough; one of her granddaughters fears Antoinette's "main sèche et violente, trop habile à chercher les poux" (23). Nonetheless, Antoinette shows some generosity (or perhaps pity) toward her grandchildren, giving them sugar and chocolate, when they come crawling under the table, begging. In Tremblay's *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte*, when Victoire walks by Marcel while he feigns sleeps, he is paralyzed with fear. Others find Victoire scary as well: the prostitute refers to Victoire's home as haunted "à cause de la vieille grand-mère aux yeux louches qui promenait sur tout un regard méchant de sorcière frustrée" (62). Richard, who shares a room with his grandmother, is both revolted by her -- "Victoire se gourma, prit un petit mouchoir sous son oreiller, cracha. Généreusement. Richard ferma les yeux" (27) -- but happy to see her awake and living: "'J'aime mieux quand vous êtes réveillée.' 'Moé aussi!'" (28). Due to his close proximity to his grandmother, Richard understands perhaps better than anyone else in the house Victoire's frustrations and resentment, but his own status as a young child renders him even less influential than his grandmother in the household. Blais emphasizes the relationship between Antoinette and her grandchildren (the mother and father both being ineffectual and mostly silent members of the family). Tremblay, however, focuses mostly on Victoire's relationships with two of her adult children, Albertine and Édouard.

If Victoire's relationship with her daughter, Albertine, is illustrated by constant fighting, her relationship with her son, Édouard, is more complicated. Their regular arguments are blamed (by both of them) on his drinking, but there are other underlying tensions between the two. Victoire expresses some pride but mostly disappointment in her son. Édouard's homosexuality is a source of tension between himself and his mother. The word "homosexuel" is never used, although his brother-in-law, Paul (Albertine's husband), has called him "tapette à sa moman"

(119) during an argument, suggesting a recognition, if not an open acknowledgement, of Édouard's homosexuality. When upset with her uncle, Thérèse, too, calls Édouard, "Ma tante Édouard" (270) without quite comprehending its signification but by understanding it as an insult. Perhaps as an attempt to appease his mother after an evening of drunken arguments with her, he often often mimics other members of the family and Victoire cheers him on, even (or especially) when he irks his sister Albertine: "Mais quand [Édouard] allait jusqu'à appeler Gabriel 'mon homme' en posant doucement la main sur l'épaule de son frère comme le faisait toujours sa belle-sœur, Albertine fronçait les sourcils et jetait un regard réprobateur à sa mère qui, pour la faire chier encore plus, disait à Édouard: 'Encore! Encore! On dirait que c'est elle, verrat!'" (44). Édouard adores his mother, and Tremblay emphasizes Édouard's desire to please her. On this particular morning, Édouard attempts to be helpful by making breakfast for the family. He affects yet another persona: "Je suis la Fée des Étoiles et le Père Noël est mon fournisseur en œufs, en crème, en pain, en sucre, et en viande. Mais demandez-moé pas c'qu'y faut que j'y fasse en retour, votre déjeuner passerait pas!" (48). This "fairy"character reveals the indirect way in which Édouard acknowledges his homosexuality.

Besides Édouard offering to cook breakfast and Albertine attempting to be sweet-mannered, yet another event occurs that reinforces the fact that this day is extraordinary for their household: Victoire, who has not stepped out of the house in more than two years, decides to take a walk with her son around the neighborhood where she is infamous for her irrational behavior (she yells at employees, refuses to pay at cafés, and has earned a reputation in the neighborhood as a crazy woman). Victoire dresses herself in mismatched clothing purposefully to draw attention to herself and to cause her son shame. As the two walk together, Édouard feels indeed embarrassed to be seen with Victoire, knowing what people say

about her. He feels humiliated as people in their neighborhood realize that she is his mother: "Édouard, lui, aurait voulu mourir. Il connaissait très bien la réputation de sa mère. [. . .] Il avait entendu parler d'elle en termes tellement effroyables que jamais il n'avait avoué qu'elle était sa mère" (179). Édouard works in a shoe store, where his mother has behaved in a similar manner in the past, shouting, and scolding all of the employees. Her insults during past visits were directed at Édouard, besides his colleagues, whom she not only insulted as an employee, but also as a son:

> Elle le traitait comme elle traitait tous les autres, lui criant par la tête, le menaçant, usant largement des mots 'tricheur,' et 'voleur,' essayant quinze paires de souliers pour n'en acheter aucune, allant même parfois jusqu'à dire devant tout le monde: 'Je plains la mère qui vous a mis au monde!' ou bien: 'Avoir un épais de même comme fils, moé, j'me suiciderais!' (179)

Victoire does not publicly acknowledge that Édouard is her son during these rants, but her insults make it clear that he has disappointed her as a son. Bemused by her erratic behavior, Édouard does not understand why his mother insists on humiliating him, as well as herself. Tremblay's narrator reveals that Victoire would like Édouard to confront her and to yell at her, but also that Édouard both fears and adores his mother: "Le contacte avec sa mère l'électrisait, l'obnubilait, lui suçait toutes ses énergies et pourtant il en avait besoin" (191). Tremblay describes this adult son as resenting his mother (and himself) for being so dependent upon her, even to the point of wishing for her death, but terrified at the thought of losing her: "il avait beau se dire que la mort de sa mère serait une délivrance, la seule idée de savoir qu'il serait privé d'elle, de sa voix, de son regard, de ses odeurs, le terrorisait" (192). Victoire is, in fact Édouard's *raison d'être.* During their walk in the park, Victoire recounts to Édouard the events of the day he was born.

Explaining to her son how much she desired him and how bored and isolated she currently feels, Victoire pleads with him to stay with her, revealing the love for the son that has been kept hidden under her shame and their arguments. Both mother and son in this relationship avoid confrontation and affect other personalities to express their true sentiments: Victoire cannot directly tell Édouard that she loves him despite her disappointment, so she acts like a mean-spirited and irrational woman to deplore him. Similarly, when Édouard mimics his sister and sister-in-law, or pretends to be "La Fée aux Étoiles," he reveals his homosexuality through the guise of effeminate behavior. Victoire's disappointment stems in part from the fact that he, like her other two children, has not succeeded greatly. Victoire attributes this apparent lack of ambition to his homosexuality, which, although not referred to directly, is labeled as his 'anomalie' that prevents him from succeeding in a society "qui condamnait toute disposition, tendance, talent, goût, qui n'allait pas dans ses critères de normalité" (180).

However, Édouard and his sister-in-law, la grosse femme, enjoy a close relationship; she invites him to tell her about his late-night adventures. By telling her about the outside world, Édouard helps reduce the isolation felt by la grosse femme during her months of bed rest. La grosse femme has her own "anomalie:" she is 42 years old, obese, and pregnant. She is aware that others condemn her pregnancy and gossip about her. Her sister-in-law, Albertine, confirms that she, too, is shocked by her pregnancy: "Oui vous êtes trop grosse! Pis trop vieille! Savez-vous c'que le monde dissent de vous, su'a rue? Hein? Y dissent que vous êtes une cochonne!" (194). Other family members and neighbors consider her pregnancy as "un geste obscène, une situation scandaleuse, une tache sur l'honnêteté et l'intégrité de la famille" (202). However, la grosse femme remains adamant that she desires this baby, and that, despite her age and size, she is beautiful: "Elle avait voulu cet enfant, elle en avait besoin, et elle était belle!" (236). Although

la grosse femme already has two sons (Richard and Philippe), she focuses entirely on her current pregnancy and the baby yet to be born. This is partially due to the fact that la grosse femme and her husband Gabriel lost a baby girl two years earlier (Tremblay does not specify whether this loss was a miscarriage, a stillbirth, or an infant who died at some later point in life). She hopes that this new baby will replace the girl she continues to grieve, even planning to give the baby the same name if it is a girl. Her lack of attention to her other two sons results also from her necessary bed rest. Richard and Philippe have been told (by Albertine) not to talk to their mother about anything but trivial banalities, a requirement that grows increasingly difficult for the oldest son, Richard, "Car on lui avait demandé d'être impersonnel avec sa mère: 'Ta mère est ben malade, y faut pas l'achaler avec des becs pis des mots d'amour. A' se fatiquerait. Contente-toé d'y dire bonjour pis surtout parle pas de tes problèmes à l'école ni des siens icitte'" (54). Although Richard senses that his mother would like to talk with him as well, Albertine always prevents the two of them from spending time together. Thus, the mother and children are kept isolated from each other. Additionally, Gabriel works at night and sleeps much of the day, so he, too, is less available to their children. Although the title of the novel indicates the perspective of the "trois tricoteuses" (the mythical perpetual knitters who inhabit the abandoned house next door but who cannot be seen by others), la grosse femme is also "d'à côté" in her own home, kept apart from the drama and chaos both interpersonally and physically.

The tension between Albertine and la grosse femme continues as Tremblay suggests that Albertine is in fact jealous of her sister-in-law, despite her criticisms. Whereas Albertine and Édouard fight all the time, la grosse femme invites Édouard to confide in her, and the two share a passion for reading and dreaming of exotic places. Her daydreams center on living in Acapulco where she would be able to enjoy the sun and beach outdoors, and where she could have as many

children as she wanted: "J'resterais là clouée par le soleil pis caressée par l'océan. Pis j'pourrais mettre au monde tous les enfants que je voudrais!" (32). The love that la grosse femme feels for her unborn child contrasts the lack thereof of Albertine (who has to force herself to show any affection for her own young son). Finally, Albertine is unhappy with her marriage and envies the fact that Gabriel and la grosse femme genuinely love each other, even becoming enraged to the point of tears when she hears them having sex.

Gabriel loves his wife, and he claims to desire this new baby also. As his name implies, Gabriel is "angelic" in his role as husband. Compared to the majority of other husbands featured in this novel, Gabriel is loving and devoted. He works hard (although he feels ashamed that, despite his hard work, he cannot afford to move his family out of his mother's home), and, unlike many of the other adult men in this novel, including his brother Édouard, he only drinks on the weekends. Because Gabriel works the night shift and sleeps during the day, and also because the other adult members of the household, particularly his sister Albertine, are so boisterous, Gabriel is, like his wife, "d'à côté" in his home. Instead he lets himself shine in the tavern that he frequents. At home, his family members (besides la grosse femme) do not pay much attention to him; even his mother, Victoire, focuses much more on his brother and sister (Édouard and Albertine), but at the pub he has earned himself a repuation as an orator. After drinking, Gabriel grows confident enough to voice his opinions. Tremblay acknowledges the religious connotations of Gabriel's name as he refers to Gabriel's "sermons" given at the tavern each Saturday after several beers. Tremblay describes these sermons as "toujours naïfs mais qui exprimaient parfaitement bien les grands courants d'idées qui agitaient les Québécois en ces temps d'insécurité, d'hésitations, de questionnements" (174). As a laborer who has earned himself a loyal group of listeners, Gabrielrepresents, therefore, the voice of working-class

Quebecc. It is especially through Gabriel that Tremblay presents historically accurate attitudes toward World War Two as well as why and how men chose to stay home.

Gabriel is against the war and feels strongly that the war is irrelevant to Quebecc. Quebecc is separate from the rest of Canada; he says, "Si le Canada veut épauler l'Anguelterre, c'est son problème!" (174). Gabriel's sermon on this particular day refers to the recent plebiscite on conscription, the results of which showed the disparate views on the war between anglophone and francophone Canadians.[48] Another man argues that it is for France, "la mère patrie" that Quebecc should want to participate in the war, but Gabriel is adamant that the Québécois people owe nothing to France: "La France qui nous a abandonnés! La France qui nous a vendus! Sauver la France pour qu'a'continue à nous chier sur la tête, après, en riant de notre accent pis en venant nous péter de la broue en pleine face!" (176). Gabriel's opponent charges him with siding with Hitler, and another accusation arises from someone else who asks the one question that prompts Gabriel to leave the tavern: "Tu m'as pas déjà dit que ta femme était enceinte, Gabriel?" (177). Gabriel understands the implications of this question and protests that his wife is pregnant not to prevent his going to war, but rather because he loves her and because she wanted another child. Seeing the incredulous expressions of his normally devoted listeners, Gabriel leaves the bar in a state of humiliation. The accusation made of Gabriel and of many other husbands in this novel are met with protests each time because of the inherent cowardice associated with any man who admits that he does not want to go to war. When the husband of Claire LeMieux, a neighbor, asks her if she would like to have a baby, she understands immediately what he is really asking: "Aie pas peur, maudit gnochon, y voudront jamais de toé dans l'armée, t'es tellement gros pis t'es tellement lent que tu pourrais leur faire perdre la guerre!" (90). Gabriel has already been accused of impregnating la grosse femme in order to not

go to war by his brother Édouard, after Gabriel has accused him in turn, "T'es sûr qu'y t'ont refusé dans l'armée parce que t'as les pieds plats? J'trouve que pour un pieds-plats, tu te fais aller en crises!" (48), once again implying Édouard's homosexuality without ever mentioning the word itself. After leaving the bar in despair, Gabriel meets the prostitute Béatrice, whom he knows by sight as a neighborhood acquaintance, and he confides in her the accusation that was just made of him. Béatrice gives her own opinion, and they discover that they share the same point of view regarding the war: "'Pensez-vous que c'est vrai, vous qui connaissez ben des hommes malgré votre jeune âge, qu'on a mis nos femmes enceintes pour pas aller à'guerre?' [. . .] 'Oui. Pis j'trouve que vous faites bien. [. . .] J'sais pas pourquoi c'que les hommes vont se tuer, de l'aut'bord. J'comprends pas ça la guerre'" (225). Gabriel admits then that perhaps he is a coward, and although he did not purposefully make his wife pregnant to avoid going to war, it is possible that la grosse femme had the war in mind when she wanted to get pregnant. He knows he should have not gotten his wife pregnant because of her age and weight, and he understands that she is risking her life for him. Gabriel neither understands nor wants to participate in the war, and his wife's pregnancy protects him from it.

Tremblay contrasts two depictions of reactions to and experiences of pregnancy by la grosse femme and a neighbor, Marie-Lou Brossard. Both women are seven months pregnant, but Marie-Lou, unlike la grosse femme, is completely ignorant about reproduction and sexuality: "elle qui croyait encore le jour de ses noces que les enfants sont libérés par les Indiens de Caughnawaga, aussi avait-elle été non pas surprise mais horrifiée quand le docteur Sanregret qu'elle était allée consulter à cause de ses nausées et de ses maux de ventre, au début de sa grossesse, lui avait dit qu'elle 'portait' un enfant" (209-10). Since learning this news, Marie-Lou has remained isolated in her house, terrified at her pregnancy and the birth (she believes that the

baby will come out through her navel). Her husband is equally afraid and confused by her pregnancy, which was the result of their wedding night (the only time the couple has had sex) and takes refuge in taverns to avoid facing the reality of his wife's pregnancy. On the contrary, la grosse femme, despite the medical risks, is enjoying her pregnancy and looks forward to the new baby. Additionally, because she has already given birth to her two sons (and experienced the loss of a daughter), she knows what to expect regarding the labor and delivery of her newest child. Marie-Lou despises her infant and begs him to go away: "'va-t-en, va-t-en, p'tit fatigant ta mère te veut pas, pis ton père est un fou'" (210). Both women are confined to their homes during their pregnancies, but for different reasons; la grosse femme because of her medical obligation to stay in bed, and Marie-Lou because of her fear and shame regarding her pregnancy. La grosse femme enjoys her daydreams and her reading, and she seeks out company with her husband Gabriel and with Édouard. But Marie-Lou's self-inflicted solitude only increases her fear.

Tremblay explains Marie-Lou's ignorance through his overt condemnation of the Catholic church. Tremblay has Marie-Lou remain seated by the window, emphasizing her longing to escape (her home, her pregnancy, her marriage), but her role as a dutiful wife, as well as her fear, keep her enclosed in her home and situation. This obligation is symbolized by the huge crucifix reminding her of her duties: "son corps était dirigé vers le mur où un énorme crucifix trônait entre deux lampions électriques mais sa tête était toujours tournée vers l'extérieur, vers la vie" (208). The large crucifix symbolizes the Church's stance on birth control and sexuality, and Tremblay explicitly condemns the Catholic Church's stance on sexuality and reproduction:

C'est que Marie-Louis Brassard, pur produit de l'ignorance, de l'intolérance d'une

> société rurale qui imposait le silence là où des explications auraient été vitales, qui nourrissait l'envie, l'hypocrisie et la culpabilité comme trois vertus essentielles et qui, surtout, considérait la sexualité comme un mal nécessaire (non pas un péché mais le péché, le seul, l'ultime, pas où les femmes doivent passer pour assurer une progéniture à la race, s'abîmait dans la peur de son enfant. (209)

Tremblay critiques the Catholic Church throughout the novel. For example, Édouard and la grosse femme enjoy reading works by Victor Hugo, an author who has been put on the list of banned works by the Catholic Church.[49] Albertine, shocked to find her brother and sister-in-law reading condemned material, claims that "J'aime mieux être ignorante pis en état de grâce qu'être au courant de toute pis damnée" (69). Albertine would also prefer to not know about other women's pregnancies. Horrified by the sight of all of the pregnant women in the neighborhood, she claims that women are supposed to keep their pregnant state hidden: "Attendre un bébé avait toujours été vaguement honteux pour les femmes de la ville et elles dissimulaient habituellement leur gros ventre sous un corset qui les étouffait et des vêtements très amples qui déguisaient leur silhouette" (258-9). Knowing about life, through literature and through the awareness and celebration of pregnancies, is regarded as sinful by Albertine. Both Albertine and Marie-Lou are uninformed women, yet Tremblay casts them in completely different lights. Because Albertine is willfully unknowledgeable, preferring not to see other women's pregnancies and not to read banned books, she provides comic relief through her unquestioned obedience and chosen ignorance. Yet the naiveté of Marie-Lou is tragic, as her own lack of knowledge is not her fault, but rather that of the dominant religious and cultural discourse.

Not only does the Catholic guilt surrounding sexuality prevent women from enjoying

their own pregnancies, but it causes women to react negatively to the pregnancies of other women as well. Women can never meet the standard set by the Virgin Mary; Tremblay's narrator describes this "monstrous" religion:

> Écrasées par cette religion monstrueuse qui défendait toute sorte de moyen de contraception, cette religion fondée sur l'égoïsme des hommes, pour servir l'égoïsme des hommes, qui méprisait les femmes et en avait peur au point de faire de l'image de la Mère, la Vierge Marie, Mère de Dieu, une vierge intacte et pure, inhumaine créature sans volonté et surtout sans autonomie qui s'était retrouvée un jour enceinte sans l'avoir désiré [. . .] et qui avait enfanté sans avoir besoin de mettre au monde, insulte faite au corps des femmes (259).

Tremblay critiques these impossible standards set by the Catholic Church and the secrecy and repression regarding sexuality. Tremblay alludes to the unpleasant, even traumatic, sexual relations many of the women in this novel experience with their husbands. He describes Albertine and Paul's bed as the place "où les pires expériences de sa vie l'avaient surprise à peine adolescente, ignorante, et pure au-delà de toute commune mesure. [Albertine] avait subi et subissait encore à ce lit comme une catastrophe inévitable" (28). Because of this distressing marriage, Albertine appreciates Paul's absence: "Paul, maintenant à la guerre Dieu merci" (28). The majority of the other husbands featured in this novel, still at home are undesirable in other ways: Claire LeMieux's husband Hector is too lazy to work, the husband of another neighbor, Germaine Lauzon, forbids her to go to the theater, and Marie-Lou Brassard's husband is an alcoholic. Gabriel is one of the few kind and loving husbands, and Tremblay has la grosse femme's sexual prerogative remain clear (she initiates sex with her husband).[50] Despite her older age, risky pregnancy, and her obesity, la grosse femme celebrates life in ways (taking pleasure in

her pregnancy, reading, sex) that other women do not, and because of this, Tremblay portrays her as the most content character in this novel.

Tremblay continues his critique of the Catholic Church's stance on sexuality through his universally non-normative portrayals of sexuality in this novel. Published in 1978, during the post-sexual revolution era, Tremblay emphasizes the repression and shameful connotations associated with sexuality during World War Two era North America. La grosse femme and Gabriel have sex while she is pregnant and bedridden. Édouard is homosexual. Béatrice and Mercedes are prostitutes. Even the characters who are not sexually active have untraditional relationships; the restaurant owner, Marie-Sylvia, devotes herself to her cat instead of men, of whom she is afraid. And although Tremblay stresses that there is nothing sexual between Victoire and her brother, Josephat-le-Violon, the relationship between these siblings otherwise ressembles a romantic drama: "Leurs rapports étaient toujours restés très étroits et une passion bizarre s'était développée entre eux, d'où la sexualité était complètement absente mais où toutes ses autres composantes, la jalousie, la possession, le doute, les larmes, les déchirures, les joies secrètes, les ruptures, les réconciliations, étaient plus arrimées que dans une histoire d'amour ordinaire et pus exigeantes encore" (271). Tremblay hints at other instances of incestuous behavior among the children: Thérèse and Philippe share a bed and have engaged in some "impudeurs mal compris" (28). On this particular day, Thérèse kisses the handsome young playground monitor, who in turn is frightened by his resulting erection and the pleasure he feels from kissing a young girl. Tremblay notes the irony of this exchange as the monitor is there primarily to ensure that boys over the age of six do not play near the girls in case they peek under the girls' skirts. Having to separate brothers and sisters, such as Richard, Philippe, Thérèse and Marcel, due to this gendered regulation is illogical, observes Tremblay's narrator, as at home the

children “prennent probablement leur bain ensemble” (70). While Thérèse experiences her first kiss with the adult playground monitor, Richard ejaculates for the first time at the zoo in the park, but he feels ashamed and bewildered by this new physical enjoyment. In his study of Tremblay’s novel, *Écriture d’une naissance/ Naissance d’une écriture*,” Richard Duchaine notes that the sexual awakenings of Richard and Thérèse result in opposite reactions: “Si Richard est persuadé d’avoir commis le plus odieux des péchés, Thérèse est plutôt déçue de la fausseté de son acte” (51). However, the playground monitor is equally as troubled by the arousal he unexpectedly experiences during Thérèse’s kiss as Richard is by his ejaculation, but the resulting experiences of Richard and the playground monitor contrast each other. Whereas the playground monitor remains bewildered and troubled, ashamed of his desire but unable to prevent himself from following Thérèse home, Richard finds a confidante in whom to confess his troubles as well as his newly discovered sexual act.

Because Richard has been forbidden to talk to his own mother, la grosse femme, about anything serious, the prostitute Mercedes provides him with a (nonphysical) education about sex. This role of mentor is also taken on by the other prostitute, Béatrice, to whom Gabriel pours his heart out after being humiliated in the tavern for his alleged cowardly actions (impregnating his wife to avoid going to war). The two prostitutes serve as complements to la grosse femme. Because Richard has been forbidden to talk to his mother about anything serious, along with the fact that sexual education is something learned at home, Mercedes fills that need, thereby alleviating Richard’s anxiety. Additionally, Béatrice serving as a source of comfort and a listener to Gabriel, who also does not want to burden his wife with worries. Béatrice often acts as a confidante to other men, and she complains about this role: “Quand les hommes me parlent, y s’imaginent toujours qu’y parlent à quelqu’un d’autre. Y me prennent pour leurs

femmes, pour leurs amis, y se confessent à moé comme à leur curé mais y me prennent jamais pour moé!" (197). The two prostitutes serve an important role to la grosse femme's family, by filling a need (a source of information and of comfort). Meanwhile, Tremblay gives details of the two prostitutes' own families. Mercedes has rejected the pious path that her mother took because she saw what religious duty had done to her:

> [Sa mère] était *la mère* comme l'entendait l'Église et poussait la naïveté jusqu'à s'en vanter. 'J'ai jamais rien faite contre l'Église ni contre le bon Dieu, pis chus sûre que mon Ange Gardien époussette ma place au ciel tous les matins!' Cette exécrable naïveté que Mercedes avait toujours rêvé de détruire, sa mère avait gardé jusqu'à la fin. [. . .] Cinquante ans de misère, huit couches plus pénibles les unes que les autres en plus. Sans repos. Jamais cette femme ne s'est reposée" (55 emphasis in original).

Tremblay's negative portrait of a dutiful yet martyred mother is yet another piece of evidence of the Catholic church's misogyny. Even if socially marginalized, his prostitutes, Mercedes and Béatrice have more independence and happiness than Mercedes's mother. Tremblay's description of Mercedes's mother contrasts with that of Béatrice's aunt, Ti-Lou, who was also a prostitute. Despite listening to Ti-Lou recount openly and proudly her tales of prostitution and power, Béatrice has never revealed to her aunt that she has followed in her footsteps professionally: "Elle n'avait pas encore avoué à Ti-Lou qu'elle [. . .] avait fait le grand saut qui fait d'une 'putain en puissance, une putain puissante'" (60). This reticence suggests a degree of shame felt by Béatrice regarding her profession. Other acquaintances also believe that Béatrice and Mercedes should be ashamed and behave more discreetly; the shopkeeper Marie-Sylvia resents them for openly referring to their jobs and claims that she would not allow them in her store if they were not such good customers. This recalls Albertine's belief that the women in

their neighborhood should hide their pregnant bodies and that her sister-in-law should be ashamed of both her pregnancy and her obesity.

The obesity ("grosseur") of la grosse femme has increased during her pregnancy ("grossesse"). Her son Richard, "qui vénérait sa mère comme une sainte" (41) feels increasingly alienated from la grosse femme for several reasons. Albertine has discouraged him from speaking to his mother under the guise of causing her too much stress, but Richard also resent his mother's blossoming friendship with his uncle Édouard, whom he despises and whom he sees as having usurped his place. Finally, Richard almost does not recognize his mother due to her changing body: "Depuis qu'il voyait sa mère grossir presque à vue d'œil, ressemblant de moins en moins à cette femme si douce, si enveloppante qui avait enchanté sa tendre enfance et de plus en plus à un tas de graisses molles sans personnalité ni caractère" (44). Distorted by pregnancy and weight gain, his mother's large body no longer provides comfort to Richard. Other members of the family are smaller than la grosse femme whose obesity is extreme enough to define her identity, but they are still fat: Marcel rests his head against "l'épaule grasse" (29) of Albertine who is also described as "un peu grasse mais très belle" (28) by Tremblay's narrator. Édouard is also overweight ("il était lui-même assez corpulent" (32)). When he and his mother go out together, his size is often referred to, directly or indirectly by the narrator or other passersby. Because he does not flirt with her, Françoise the waitress "avait fini par ressentir de l'aversion pour cet obèse qui semblait préférer la nourriture grasse aux femmes" (218-9). Even the young Philippe is described as having "le corps grassouillet et doux" (38). Tremblay's emphasis of the size and weight of these family members does not reflect their personality in a negative way.

On the contrary, the obesity of Claire Lemieux's husband, Hector, to whom Tremblay's

narrator constantly refers as a whale ("sa baleinde de mari" (88)), is characteristic of his laziness. Hector has not worked for years whereas at seven months pregnant, Claire Lemieux is taking care of their family, continuing her work outside of the home as well as doing all of the domestic tasks. She feels indifferent toward Hector, observing him constantly gain weight with amusement and tolerating his "ennuyeux et primaires" (75) sexual needs. Knowing her husband will not provide for their family even after the baby is born, she has decided to return to her parents' house, "traînant son amas de graisses molles derrière elle" (91). She does not consider leaving him or even cheating on him, as all of the eligible men are currently overseas participating in the war:

> La guerre avait kidnappé tous les mâles un tant soit peu en bonne santé. [. . .] elle n'avait laissé aux femmes du pays que leurs prêtres (qui en profitaient bien), les garçonnets trop jeunes pour donner leur viande, leurs pères qui racontaient les atrocités de l'autre guerre pour les encourager et, quelquefois, leurs maris quand ils étaient infirmes ou trop prolifiques (75-6).

In this citation, Tremblay subtly critiques both the Catholic Church (through his suggestion that its priests have sexual relations with married women whose husbands are away at war, thereby committing both adultery and breaking their vows of celibacy) and the absurdity of the violence of wars ("donner leur viande"). The last clause "trop prolifiques" reinstates the regulation that permits fathers to stay at home if they so choose, which has prompted so many pregnancies to occur simultaneously as well as accusations.

Tremblay's other minor characters in this novel are mostly pregnant and/or overweight. The neighbor Germaine Lauzon, "beaucoup plus grosse que ses sœurs, Gabrielle Jodoin et Rose Ouimet" (196) – all three sisters are seven or eight months pregnant -- is influenced by the poor

eating habits of her husband.[51] Laura is the daughter of Joseph-le-Violon (Victoire's brother), and she arrives at the home of la grosse femme also around eight months pregnant. Albertine cannot help but to comment upon Laura's size (despite the fact or perhaps because she knows that the subject makes Laura uncomfortable): "T'en ben grosse, Laura! Si tu continues à engraisser de même, tu vas avoir l'air de ta tante ça s'ra pas long!" (258). Whereas la grosse femme is, despite her size and her state of bed rest, happy with her husband, her daydreams, and of her soon-to-be-born child, Laura is preoccupied with her weight, and says relatively little about her pregnancy. She is so uncomfortable with her body that she cannot relax around other people. While the rest of the family eats dinner together, Laura stays alone with la grosse femme, who encourages her to get comfortable. Laura remains stiff, deploring her size, which she blames partially on her husband, who is also "déjà obèse" (257) at a young age. A celebrated chef, he cooks for Laura and brings home extra desserts from the hotel where he works, and as a result, Laura has continued to gain weight rapidly. Tremblay's emphasis upon fat characters is, like his nontraditional subject choices and language usage, one aspect of the realism of his work. Although at times stereotypical (the fat, lazy Hector, the gluttonous, miserable Laura), obesity is a preoccupation for many people that does not often appear in literature. The excess weight of so many characters may also be a characterization of the working-class environment here (Tremblay's narrator notes "le goût morbide pour le sucre que développent souvent les enfants pauvres" (53)).

The descriptions of the delicacies created by Laura's husband contrast with the underlying sense of rationing due to the war. Whereas Laura's obesity is a direct result of an abundance of rich food, the members of Victoire's household bemoan the lack of items such as butter, sugar and beef (everything Édouard mentions at breakfast during his "Fée des Étoiles"

impression). This rationing affects other households as well; Germaine Lauzon warns her sisters that they will not find any sugar at her house: "J'en ai pus! Y'est assez toffe à trouver, par les temps qui courent!" (170). When Albertine discovers that Marie-Lou Brassard's husband has bought the last bottles of beer from the store, she marches to their home in fury to argue for one.

The reality of rationing that has resulted from the war contrasts with Tremblay's mythical elements in this novel, primarily "les trois tricoteuses" next door and the story recited by Victoire's brother, Josephat-le-Violon, after dinner. These fantastic details allow for escapism similar to la grosse femme's daydreams. Rose, Violette, and Mauve (the neighbors) knit continually, allegedly for all of the unborn babies of the neighborhood, but their booties will never be worn; rather, they are markers of life and death in the community. The three girls, and their mother, Florence, cannot be seen by anyone except, as Florence explains, crazy people; interestingly, Marcel is able to see and speak with them, and Victoire glimpses Florence briefly, which scares her, thinking she might be mentally unstable. Violette undergoes a *prise de conscience* in which she suddenly understands that her entire life has taken place in this abandoned house as they have witnessed all of the births of everyone in the neighborhood, even dating back to the generations preceding Victoire's birth. Being told to knit perpetually, the three girls are kept in the same ignorance as the children in the "real" family's home next door, according to Duchaine: "L'incompréhension de Violette indique que Florence a jusqu'à maintenant observé à l'égard de ses filles le même silence qui prévaut dans la famille de Victoire" (55). The "tricoteuses" can also see (and are seen by) the arrogant cat, Duplessis, who is violently killed by the dog Godbout. Both animals are personified by Tremblay and mock the politicians Maurice Duplessis and Adélard Godbout.[52] The young Marcel can also see the "tricoteuses," bringing the injured Duplessis to Florence and asking her to save him).

Victoire also briefly glimpses Florence, but is scared by her vision. Victoire's brother, Josephat-le-Violon comes for dinner and treats the family to music played on his violin and a tale about how he, as a boy, got the job as the lighter of the moon. In his study entitled *Rêver la lune: L'imaginaire de Michel Tremblay dans les Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*, André Brochu observes the maternal symbolism of the moon: "La Lune qu'on installe au ciel si laborieusement, c'est la Mère souveraine, celle qui dispensera les bienfaits de la vie et du Rêve" (Brochu 65). The parallel between the moon and the Mother continues through the similarities of la grosse femme and the moon. Joseph-le-violon notes the importance of the moon: "Parce que la lune est la seule chose dans le monde dont tu peux être sûr" (255). Similarly, la grosse femme's presence and stability renders her the member of the family on whom everyone can consistently rely.

Tremblay continues with his depiction of this family's extraordinary day by having Édouard, Victoire, Gabriel, and the children all meet up at the park, where Mercedes and Béatrice are invited to join this family for dinner. At the sight of the two prostitutes, Albertine, horrified, refuses to serve them: "Moé, sarvir ces deux guidounes-là pour souper? Jamais! De toute façon, ces femmes-là, ça mange pas, ça boit!" (268). Because Albertine will not feed the two women, Victoire finally seizes her opportunity to do something useful at home: serve the meal. Duchaine observes that while Tremblay's description of the breakfast meal had merely appeared positive (because of Édouard's preparation of the meal and Albertine's false good mood), the evening meal results in a true change: "Alors que la substitution d'Albertine par Édouard au déjeuner n'avait modifié le climat familial qu'en 'surface' et n'avait pas menacé l'autorité d'Albertine, Victoire opère quant à elle un 'véritable' renversement des rôles en remplaçant Albertine au service et surtout en décrétant l'admission à table de [Béatrice] et de Mercedes" (70). The contrast between the two meals strengthens as they end: at breakfast,

despite the superficial good moods of Albertine and Édouard, the meal finishes with arguments. After dinner, although Albertine is furious at Victoire for welcoming the prostitutes, the two do not argue which confirms that Victoire has finally successfully asserted her position of authority and that a genuine modification of behaviors and temperaments has occurred within this household.

Besides Victoire's reclamation of her authoritative position in the family, each of the other major characters have also undergone a significant evolution during this day. While at breakfast, Albertine forces herself to be gentle with Marcel to placate her daughter Thérèse, at dinnertime, her affection requires no effort:

> [Marcel] s'était mis à trembler, tout à coup, son front était devenu moite de sueurs 'Tu veux-tu aller faire un beau dodo dans le grand litte de moman, mon trésor?' 'Mon trésor!' [Albertine] l'avait appelé 'mon trésor'! Et sans même qu'elle s'en aperçoive sa voix était devenue douce et chantante! Thérèse avait regardé sa mère en souriant. Albertine, qui s'en était rendu compte, avait baissé les yeux (233).

Although Richard had been avoiding his mother due to his aunt Albertine's warnings that she is in too delicate a state, Richard joyfully flings himself into her arms, so pleased to find himself next to her that he does not know whether to address her as "tu" or "vous" (283). Richard's own feelings happiness also has resulted from his sexual education with Mercedes that has decreased his anxiety regarding his new sexual feelings. On the contrary, the playground monitor's extreme anxiety resulting from his arousal after Thérèse's kiss has left him with troubling new feelings that drive him to follow Thérèse home despite himself, whereas Thérèse seems to have dismissed her first kiss as a disappointment. Gabriel has undergone an extremely humiliating confrontation with his normally-devoted listeners, and Édouard has spent an embarrassing but

revelatory afternoon with his mother that has left both of them with a better understanding of their complex relationship. While at breakfast, Édouard jokingly states that Santa Claus provides him with food (and suggests that he compensates him with sexual favors), at dinner time, Tremblay promotes him to Santa Claus himself: "Édouard avait l'air d'un gros Père Noël sans costume en vacances dans les pays chauds" (233). Tremblay's description of Édouard suggests that he has become more comfortable and confident at home, with no need for affectations ("sans costume"). Tremblay's characters confront the shame associated with sexuality (Richard), obesity (Laura), prostitution (Béatrice), public humiliation (Gabriel), difficult relationships with a parent or child (Victoire and Édouard, Victoire and Albertine, and Thérèse and Albertine) or pregnancy (Marie-Lou Brassard) by revealing their problems and communicating with others.

Finally, la grosse femme maintains her calm, contented essence but, in a remarkably touching scene, she actively invites all of the neighboring pregnant women to come together to talk about what they are all experiencing physically and emotionally – to celebrate their pregnant bodies and life itself. After not leaving her bed for months, la grosse femme requests that she be transferred to the balcony. Just as the moon is transposed to the sky with great effort to "dispenser les bienfaits de la vie et du rêve," in Josephat-le-Violon's story, la grosse femme comes out onto the balcony which much laborious effort to dispense advise to the other pregnant women: "Moé aussi j'attends un bébé comme vous autres. [. . .] V'nez, on va en parler" (285). Even Marie-Louise Brassard, with whom la grosse femme has never spoken, comes over, trying to disguise her pregnant belly with her jacket. This is an important moment of change in the novel, for Brassard is going to confront her fears and shame. As the pregnant women arrive, the other family members leave: "Discrètement, le balcon se vida pour laisser la place aux femmes

enceintes" (285). Tremblay has made it clear that the women's reactions to their own pregnancies are varied: Marie-Lou is terrified, Laura is more concerned with her obesity than her pregnancy and Clare Lemieux hopes that the baby will encourage her husband to work. As for the three sisters, Germaine is struggling physically during her pregnancy, but her sister Gabrielle is thrilled by her own pregnancy, and their other sister, Rose Ouimet, is resentful: ("Rose Ouimet passa sa main sur son ventre rebondi. 'Maudite balloune!' Elle attendait son premier enfant sans joie, froide, distante, résignée" (96)). La grosse femme, older and more experienced in life and as a mother, serves as a teacher to the other women: "Elles étaient sept. Six d'entre elles étaient dans le début de la vingtaine et ne savaient pas ce qui les attendait et la septième, qui aurait pu être leur mère, le leur expliquait" (285-6). La grosse femme serves as a mother figure to the other, younger women.

La grosse femme is an untraditional protagonist; she is "old" (especially in terms of her pregnancy), obese, physically immobile, yet Tremblay makes it clear that she is the most content member of her large family. Her initiative to reach out to all the other pregnant women on their street and their willing responses, reveal that her desire to communicate openly is shared by others. Pregnancy, in particular, is an experienceshared by almost every woman, yet the secrecy and shame surrounding this natural condition drive some to want to hide (as Albertine believes they should) and some to have no understanding of what is happening to their own bodies (such as Marie-Lou Brassard). Tremblay continues to critique the misogyny of the religious institution that requires women both be subservient to men but also hides the truth about women's bodies: "La religion catholique, en un mot, niait la beauté de l'enfantement et condamnait les femmes à n'être jamais dignes puisque la mère de leur Dieu, l'image consacrée de la Maternité, n'avait été qu'un entrepôt temporaire d'où l'Enfant n'était ni entré ni sorti" (226). By celebrating her own

unconventional pregnancy, la grosse femme is defying the Church, the war (by keeping her husband at home with her), and society's dictation of how women should be appropriately pregnant. By refusing to remain silent, as her children might prefer, Victoire, too, refuses to stop living life and participating in family matters simply because of her old age and physical difficulties.

In this novel, Tremblay valorizes mother-son relationships. Marcel, Richard and Édouard all adore their mothers, despite their flawed relationships. Marcel loves Albertine despite her bad temper; Richard loves la grosse femme despite their forced separation; and Édouard loves Victoire, despite her erratic and sometimes cruel behavior. On the other hand, the mother-daughter relationships in this novel are not presented as unconditionally loving. Thérèse has learned not to rely upon her mother, even needing to convince Albertine to behave more gently with Marcel. Albertine and Victoire resent each other, and Victoire prefers to direct her emotional energy toward Édouard. In his depiction of this family's remarkable day, Tremblay critiques shame, repression and secrecy, particularly regarding discourse on sexuality and reproduction as prescribed by the Catholic Church, preferring open communication. Tremblay has noted that he took nine months to write this novel, exactly the same duration as a typical human gestation period: "En fait, l'écriture de 'la grosse femme . . . enceinte' m'a pris exactement neuf mois, jour pour jour" (Lemieux 22), making this novel representative of the creation of both literary and human achievements.

Chapter 4

France Théoret's (Wo)Manipulation of Language

During the post-*Révolution Tranquille* era of the 1970s and 1980s, Quebecc witnessed a surge of feminist creativity. Authors such as France Théoret, Denise Boucher, Madeleine Gagnon, Nicole Brossard, Jovette Marchessault, Louky Berisianik and Pol Pelletier created original and engaging novels, poetry, and performance pieces. While they should not be considered a group of writers due to their differing viewpoints, backgrounds, and literary styles (indeed, several of these writers have adamantly resisted the suggestion that they comprise a specific school of thought), these authors can be considered "feminist" writers due to the fact that they are each consciously writing as a woman and what Karen Gould terms as "a female image breaker" (1981 p. 620).[53] These authors transgress what had been traditionally upheld as the norm for women writing literature through the themes and language of their texts. Many of their works question what it means to be writing as a woman and, more specifically, what it means to be writing as *une Québécoise*.

Like the other feminist authors of her generation, France Théoret's theoretical and fictional works play with or the French language while questioning what it means to be a Québécois woman writing. Théoret asserts that her personal and national identity play an essential role in her creative process: "Écrivaine et Québécoise. Qui écrira les hésitations, les tremblements physiques et psychiques, le surmoi féminin? La déchirure est certaine. L'appropriation de la langue est une expérience que je poursuis de manière globale."[54] This "appropriation" of patriarchal language remains a key preoccupation for Théoret throughout her body of works. In an article entitled "Mapping Identity in Quebecc: France Théoret," Catherine Van Dandt argues: "It was not so much the Quebeccois subject as the female subject whose

reality particularly concerned Théoret; her project [. . .] was to insert female subjects and their histories into that avant-garde writing practice" (93). This notion that Théoret valorizes and separates women's experiences from the nationalist experience is supported by Mary Jean Green who states in *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebecc National Tex*t, that "These 1970s feminists [. . .] turned their attention away from the national text, exploring the inscription in language of the female body rather than the *pays*, seeking a new language of the feminine in preference to joual" (106). However, Théoret's "project" in fact gives a voice to women who are specifically from Quebecc; her characters often use joual, which, given Théoret's extreme attention to language and syntax choices indicates her dedication to contextualizing her works in Quebecc. In an interview with Patricia Smart, Théoret mentions that the narrative voice in her works cannot help but be partially autobiographical, and that both her experiences as a woman and as *une Québécoise* have influenced her writing: "Je narre la subjectivité en liaison avec une réalité donnée [. . .] Je sais que je ne peux arracher une part importante qui me constitute: le fait d'être femme, née dans un milieu précis, au Quebecc. [. . .] Ces coordonées font partie de ma mémoire" (11). It is true that the focus of Théoret, along with the other feminist authors of her generation, concentrates more stridently on women's issues compared to some women writers of earlier decades who were preoccupied with the problems faced by the whole of Quebecc's population. Lucie Lequin notes in her article, "Les Femmes québécoises ont inventé leurs paroles" that works by certain female authors (authors such as Gabrielle Roy and Claire Martin) critique aspects of Quebecc that are not specific to women: "Elles dénoncent la situation économique, la structure politique ou encore l'oppression religieuse, mais elles ne perturbent pas les valeurs masculines et patriarcales. [. . .] Elles ont minimisé l'oppression [. . .] à la femme – oppression par l'homme – au profit de l'oppression politique et religieuse et du colonialisme

économique partagés avec l'homme" (113). Writers such as Théoret were able to be more critical of social issues regarding women specifically because life in general during post-*Révolution Tranquille* Quebecc was less oppressive (for both men and women) than during the time of these earlier women's careers.

Théoret was a participant in the play/ performance piece entitled *La Nef des Sorcières* (1976), one of the best-known feminist works from this period.[55] This text presents six monologues by different authors, each offering perspectives of womanhood that contrast with traditional literary archetypes. "L'Actrice," for example, is named "Désirée," but she focuses on her own right to desire and to own her sexuality: "Je te cherchais, Je te voulais [. . .] Connais-tu la forme de mon sexe, sa couleur, ses pétales? Moi, je sais [. . .] Je regarde mon sexe" (18). Besides reclaiming women's bodies and sexuality, the characters of *La Nef des Sorcières* reject the traditional roles, especially the familial roles, relegated to women. In another monologue, a menopausal woman observes that menstrual blood has been traditionally considered impure and shameful, but also, a sometimes welcome sign that confirms that a woman is not pregnant, thereby revealing the often unspoken truth of women not desiring children and engaging in sexual relations for pleasure and not for reproduction. In Pol Pelletier's monologue, the lesbian character reveals the conflicting feelings between loving women sexually but hating the way women have complicitly participated in societal misogyny: "Je vois ma mère et j'ai envie de vomir. Toi et toute ta lignée de servantes aplaties, vous humiliez [. . .] vous m'avez trahie, vous m'avez menti, vous m'avez fait honte . . . vous m'avez volée, vous comprenez? Vous m'avez volé mon propre sexe. Et vous l'avez vendu. Aux hommes" (67). This disdain toward women of their mothers' generation is a common motif in the works of these writers, particularly of France Théoret whose monologue in *La Nef des Sorcières* is written from the point of view of a

factory worker who expresses her longing for independence and her rejection of marriage: "Je vis toute seule. Je l'ai décidé je vais rester célibatiare. Moi aussi je veux une vraie vie, avec une vraie maison [. . .] Je me marie avec ma vie. Je serai mariée avec moi. J'ai pas été puis je serai pas dépendante des autres, ni de ma famille, ni de la société" (34-5). The low wages she earns, the scornful attitudes of her coworkers when she explains her reluctance to marry, and her tolerance of sexual harassment still create a better living condition than being dependent upon others, particularly upon a man. This longing for financial and social independence carries through the entire body of Théoret's works. Théoret's narrator mentions in this monologue that the only options for women in Quebecc are to get married and have children, to become a nun, or to remain *une vieille fille* with all of its negative connotations. Théoret's protagonists are consistently determined to choose this latter path but to transform it into something positive.

Besides the originality of the themes of feminist works such as *La Nef des Sorcières*, the language used by Théoret and these other writers does not resemble "traditional" literary syntax and language. Rather, these authors were influenced by what French writer and scholar Hélène Cixous termed *écriture féminine*, embodied in the works of other French women writers such as Luce Irigaray, Annie Leclerc, and Monique Wittig.[56] An awareness of the inherent sexism of the French language and the active efforts made to standardize new, feminine nouns (including professions such as *écrivaine* and *auteure*) have been upheld in Quebecc, as well as in Belgium and Switzerland.[57] I borrow "womanipulation," a term attributed to the Canadian critic and scholar Barbara Godard, to describe how authors such as Théoret have played with standardized French to criticize its ignorance or forced submission of women's experiences.[58] Creating original syntax and new vocabulary, the words on the page themselves are often as important as

the stories being told by these French and Québécois authors, whose fictional and theoretical works explore the importance of language use. In her influential experimental novel, *Les Guérillères* (1969), Wittig has her warriors explain to a woman the importance of reclaiming patriarchal language: "[Ils] t'ont chassée du monde des signes, et cependant ils t'ont donné des noms, ils t'ont appelée esclave. [. . .] Ils écrivent de ce droit de donner des noms qu'il va si loin que l'on peut considérer l'origine du langage comme un acte d'autorité émanant de ceux qui dominent" (162).[59] This description of arbitrary but stagnant Saussurian signs expresses the frustration that francophone writers such as Brossard, Wittig, and Théoret experienced with traditional discourse. In her article entitled "Le déplacement du symbolique," Théoret refers to this style of writing as *écriture au féminin* and defines it as an act of imposing a female subject within a patriarchal language that often renders the feminine invisible.[60] This action is necessary because: "Au Cœur de la littérature, il y a la langue, une langue qui n'est pas la même pour tous même quand nous parlons tous la même langue" (143). Théoret explains that this sort of writing is not the invention of a new language, but rather a way of shifting the expected symbolic that often ignores women and women's experiences. Discussing this trend of feminizing language, Lequin observes that "cet éclatement de la langue [. . .] permet aux femmes d'inventer leurs propres paroles, de dépouiller leurs mots de préjugés sexistes, bref, de se dire 'en femme' avec un nouvel élan" (*Les Femmes*, 114). By creating new words, as well as non-standardized literary styles, these writers could better express what was true to their experiences, as opposed to the nouns prescribed by the patriarchal, dominant literary discourse. For example, in their texts, these authors create feminine nouns that technically exist only in the masculine form (i.e. "écrivaine" "quelqu'une," "soldate") and reclaim traditionally pejorative terms used to denounce women (i.e. "sorcière," "chienne"). The syntax is nonstandard, often written in choppy poetic

forms that resist easy classification.

The valorization of *écriture féminine* and feminist prose came during a time of a feminist movement in Quebecc during the 1970s. The Collectif Clio historians characterize this period as a wave of solidarity among women, sparked by the recognition of their having been oppressed for centuries:

> Les femmes étaient habituées à se voir par les yeux des hommes, à se mesurer par des normes masculines. [. . .] Désormais, certaines femmes commencent à y substituer une nouvelle réalité, celle de l'expérience féminine que seules les autres femmes peuvent véritablement partager. [. . .] Il faudra d'abord démolir cette vision presque exclusivement masculine dans laquelle les femmes sont habituées à se trouver. (476)

This feminist movement had political and social implications. Feminist journals and newspapers, notably *Les Têtes de Pioche*, *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour*, and *Québécoises deboutte!* (to which Théoret and some of her peers contributed) addressed the concerns of women in Quebecc.[61] Reading these and other theoretical and political feminist texts of this era, one can see that there are clear intertextual and international influences in this writing, including the discourses of racism, Marxism, postcolonialism, and of important French and American feminist thinkers and writers of the time such as Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, Shulamith Firestone, and Kate Millet. The feminist movement of 1970s Quebecc was also firmly grounded in nationalist thought; the F.L.F. organization (*Le Front de Libération des Femmes*), quickly ousted its anglophone participants while reinforcing its status as a critical response to the treatment of women by the Front de Libération du Quebecc (F.L.Q.) by promoting as its slogan: "Pas de Quebecc libre sans libération des femmes! Pas de femmes libres sans libération du Quebecc!" (cited in *L'Histoire des femmes du Quebecc depuis quatre siecles* (483)). The link

between women's liberation and Quebecc's independence was also supported by artist and activist Pauline Julien (the singer of "Mommy," as discussed in my introduction). Julien was an outspoken proponent of both Quebecc's sovereignty and feminist goals. For her album "Femmes de Paroles" (1977), Julien collaborated with Madeleine Gagnon and Denise Boucher (other feminist writers of the time) as well as with Michel Tremblay to create songs that depicted the lives of women in Quebecc. According to Julien, she wanted to devote an entire album to songs "qui racontent les injustices dont ont été victimes les femmes de Quebecc depuis un siècle. [. . .] Fini, le temps de l'épouse servile et de la machine à faire des enfants! Nous voulons nous aussi, nous les femmes, participer à la création, à la transformation du monde" (Ligeois 30).

An important component of women's liberation, as voiced in the 1970s by feminists of Quebecc such as Pauline Julien, is the recognition that women have been oppressed through their roles as mothers. This denunciation of the family as an exploitative institution was particularly alienating to many women. However, the feminist movement's message of motherhood as a patriarchal institution that prohibited women from being in control of their bodies was widespread, and women throughout Quebecc began to question their familial roles: "Lorsque les féministes marxistes démontrent que la production de biens et de services, travail quotidien des ménagères, est une partie intégrante de notre économie, les femmes commencent à se demander pourquoi personne ne reconnaît la valeur de leur 'travail invisible'" (Collectif Clio 488). In her essay entitled "Anatomie du Féminisme," Michèle Lalonde also uses Marxist terms to analyze women's reproduction, saying that it has been idealized as "sacred" (she uses the term ironically) in the socio-economic realm: "Le féminisme nie le caractère sacré de la grossesse et de l'enfantement, c'est-à-dire rejette la mission économique sacrée de la femme (produire des individus humains et vaquer sans relâche à l'entretien immédiat de cette production)" (210).[62]

During this same era, American poet and theorist Adrienne Rich's influential *Of Woman Born* (discussed in my introduction) revealed the history of the institution of motherhood, including the social and medical history of pregnancy, labor and delivery, abortion and sterilization, including her own humiliating experience having to present her case for sterilization – dependant upon her husband's permission -- to a panel of male physicians.[63] Rich's criticism of motherhood as an institution, as well as her own mixed feelings about being a mother, is defended by a statement that "This book is not an attack on the family or on mothering, except as defined and restricted under patriarchy" (14 emphasis in original). The consideration of motherhood as an oppressive, patriarchal institution was promoted by other feminists of this period in the United States who, to quote a popular feminist anthology of the time, supported the idea that "Sisterhood is Powerful" whereas motherhood is a patriarchal trap. In her work on the psychoanalysis of heroines in 19th-century novels entitled *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch notes that "the paradigm of sisterhood has the advantage of freeing women from the biological function of giving birth. [. . .] In this feminist family romance, sisters are better mothers, providing more nurturance and a greater encouragement of autonomy . . . sisters can replace mothers" (164). While these ideas could be alienating to feminists who are mothers, keeping them trapped in what Hirsch calls the "mother-closet" (164), feminist writers such as Théoret strived to find inspiration and support from other women of their own generation, rather from their own mothers and older women.

An issue of *La Nouvelle Barre du Jour* in 1982 was devoted to motherhood. It included France Théoret's essay, "La Mère peut-elle être moderne?" in which the author cites her own conflicting feelings toward motherhood and mother-daughter relationships. Théoret claims that "[la mère] est inévitable lorsqu'on écrit" (47), acknowledging the influence of women-as-

mothers yet making the distinction between the individual "mère" and the archetypical "Mère:" "Ce ne serait pas la mère elle-même comme femme ou individue qui serait prise à partie mais la Mère, l'ordre ou le pouvoir maternel, le maternel" (48). Like Rich, Théoret criticizes the socially constructed Mother archetype. To answer the question posed in the title of her essay, "la Mère" cannot be modern for several reasons. First of all, "la Mère" is inevitably associated with nature whereas "le Père" is associated with culture. Because nature does not evolve, neither does the mother. Théoret notes that feminists refer to this stagnant figure as "La Mère patriarcale" because of her complicity with the patriarchy. Théoret argues that this is why daughters in literature cannot and do not want to identify with their mothers. In Théoret's fictional works, her protagonists are all daughter figures who seek to distance themselves from the lifestyles of their mothers.

Théoret depicts this old-fashioned, trapped "Mère" in her short story, "Le Tweed anglais," included in her collection *L'Homme qui peignait Staline: récits* (1989): "La mère existe par ce qui lui arrive" (106). This passivity is linked to appropriation of her own body:

> La mère n'a pas d'autre nom que maman pour les enfants trop nombreux nés malgré elle de son ventre fécond. Cette femme s'est transformée en une maman le temps trop bref d'une chanson d'amour. Les enfants sont venus l'un après l'autre. Le premier l'avait rendu heureuse un temps trop court, le second s'annonçait déjà alors qu'elle s'oubliait dans la respiration d'être enfin femme et mère. (105)

This portrait represents the passivity and loss of identity that Théoret's protagonists actively seek to avoid. "Le Tweed anglais" is essentially a portrait of a woman who is a wife and mother not out of desire but out of the inevitable destiny of Québécois women: "Elle ne s'est attachée ni à ses enfants ni à son mari [. . .] toutefois le respectable statut civil de femme mariée avait eu un

effet lénifiant" (107). Having lost control over her life and her body, this woman enforces irrational rules and regulations onto her own children, including her eldest daughter who is at once fascinated by and afraid of her. The daughter wants to ask her mother questions about life and about her father (whose absence is due to his gambling addiction) but she stops herself because she knows that these questions would break the boundaries established between her mother and herself: "Elle intuitionne qu'elle s'immisce entre sa mère et son père si elle verbalise la question. [. . .] La fille ne souhaite pas brusquer la situation déjà tendue. [. . .] Pourquoi y a-t-il tant de sujets dont on ne peut parler?" (108). Although this story is centered on the mother, Théoret privileges the observations of the daughter who sees that her mother feels unhappy, hears her parents fighting, and understands that, due to her father's gambling, her mother is obliged to sell the beautiful tweed suit originally intended for the daughter. Throughout Théoret's fictional works, the fathers are often irresponsible with money (gambling is a common activity) and the female protagonists, regardless of their age or status in life, always identify as daughters who express sympathy toward their own mothers while adamantly rejecting marriage and motherhood for themselves.

This rejection of marriage and motherhood is present in two of Théoret's early works, *Une Voix pour Odile* (1978) and *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (1982), two collections of nonlinear, fragmented text that address the issue of writing as a woman. Both works are classified as "romans" by Théoret but do not resemble traditional novels. In *Une Voix pour Odile*, Théoret plays not only with the words themselves but also with their presentation on the page. In some sections, the writing appears only on the right-hand side of the page. In another section, a small circle (perhaps indicating that the challenges that present themselves to women writers are cyclical) precedes each paragraph, said to state a different woman author's point of

view. Recalling the criticism of patriarchal language, the narrator, in a section entitled "Plaidoyer pour le droit à l'existence des femmes!" reminds her readers that "Je suis autre. [. . .] Je suis le manque [. . .] pollué par toutes les idées, images, mythes que la société se fait de toutes les femmes, et par conséquent, de moi" (59). Due to this internalized misogyny, the narrator struggles to find her own voice while expressing the desire to also give a voice to other women. This desire is expressed visually on original edition's cover, which features Manet's "Bar aux Folies-Bergère." This Impressionist painting depicts a female bartender in a low-cut black dress gazing down. Behind her, through the mirror's reflection, we see a male customer at the bar. On the back cover of *Une Voix pour Odile*, there is a photograph of France Théoret, wearing a similar black dress, but looking directly at her viewers. The juxtaposition between Manet's bartender, who is an object for both the viewers of the painting and her male clientele, and Théoret's photo, which reclaims this objectification through her direct gaze, reinforces the notion suggested by the title that Théoret hopes to assert women's agency. The title of Manet's painting suggests that it is the location that is important, and not the woman (although she is obviously the subject of the painting). On the other hand, Théoret's title names specifically the narrator's aunt, Odile, who "était une espèce de folle de s'être laissée faire quinze infants" (12). This motif of *la folie* of women repeats itself throughout this text, despite the fact that the narrator acknowledges that it is a cliché to speak of women's hysteria. In a *mise en abyme* of the text, decriptions of women's *folie* pervade this text as the writing itself becomes increasingly unstable. The final three sections of *Une voix pour Odile* break completely with any resemblance of standard writing, as the narrator/ author plays with words in a free-flow of associations: "Je une phrase une perte une merde un creux un sanglot lot pas bas haut puite attache attache rêve passion passivité ô sui ô cuit vivre sang luire dire univoque paresse délire freak freak gogo vibrer sens

mot jus expérience l'alta gris glu gris glu entre unie vérité" (73). The idea of connection between women is affirmed as the narrator searches for the link between "Je, langue, mère" (13), but she struggles between returning to the language of her childhood (the language associated with her mother) and finding her own language. She needs to invent her own language and style of writing because the dominant language has no meaning to her: "CE QUE JE VOIS, je suis incapable de l'écrire. Je n'ai pas les mots. Je diffracte la réalité à dire à travers des représentations données, importées, avalées d'un savoir que je n'ai pas fait mien" (53 emphasis in original).

Again and again, the narrator repeats that women in Quebecc have three options: marrying and having children (like the narrator's aunt Odile) becoming a nun, or staying single but being condemned to the status of "une vieille fille." Writing is a tool of subversion for women who are unhappy with these options. The narrator's observations contrast the essentialist ideals of motherhood: "D'où je viens, les mères s'arrachaient le ventre d'être enceinte. J'écoute: derrière la porte, on bat un enfant" (71). As in *La Nef des Sorcières*, Théoret's narrators reveal women's negative attitudes toward motherhood and children. For a woman who chooses to write instead of following the expected path of marriage and motherhood, "le poids de cette vocation est énorme quand on a eu une éducation catholique très suivie et quand tous les modèles féminins se répartissaient en trois: la mère mariée, la religieuse et le déchet de la société, la célibataire appelée par tous et par elle-même vieille fille" (51). In a theoretical article entitled "La vieille petite fille," Théoret muses upon her own choice to be childless, an "old little girl," whose nickname in French implies a level of immaturity for those women who refuse marriage and children, the socially determined path to female adulthood.[64] She remembers that her father had expressed a desire for Théoret to have a child, but she resisted this path for herself: "Mon

père m'a dit un jour que rien ne lui ferait plus de plaisir si ce n'est que j'aie un enfant. Je n'ai jamais répondu à une telle demande. Et je me suis sentie devenir au fur et à mesure des années, dans un mouvement spirale, une vieille petite fille" (75). Recalling literature's influence upon her, Théoret remembers that the "romans d'apprentissage" of her childhood all depicted women as desiring motherhood. "Si le mimétisme joue un rôle capital dans l'éducation, j'ai sûrement intériorisé le désir obligé et calqué d'être mère. Si je peux prendre ça pour un désir, j'affirme ne rien savoir du désir" (77). Despite the fact that Théoret herself had very few positive models of old maids to look up to in her life, as an adult she was able to find reassurance in the writings of Virginia Woolf that assert the importance of women's independence while offering old maid characters such as Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), who defies the male character's assertion that women cannot create art. Théoret suggests, and in her more contemporary works explicitly states, that remaining independent, without a spouse or children, is necessary in order to assure a woman of success as a writer.

In *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (1982), another fragmented fictional exploration of language and writing, Théoret continues to reject the expected role of *mère* that awaits her narrator. The motif of the realization and then rejection of the way women have been conditioned to use language recurs throughout the rest of the sections in *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* as seen by the destabilized female narrator. Théoret focuses on the narrator's voice, her use of language, and her career (as a bartender, then as a teacher and finally as a writer). The decision to focus on her own professional path instead of on family is a radical choice because, as the narrator notes, women are taught that "une femme sans homme n'est pas une femme" (39). Théoret claims that girls are prepared for life as wives and mothers from a young age as they are taught obedience and submissiveness from their parents as well as from priests ("Le prêtre et les

religieuses parlent de la soumission de la femme" (99)). Even as "independent" young women, the role of mother awaits them: "Tout juste sortie de l'enfance, je deviens l'une des petites mères. [. . .] Les filles annoncent régulierement des mariages. Pas de temps perdu pour ces filles de Saint-Henri et de Saint-Colomban, les curés, les familles applaudissent. Les gars nous appellent les petites mères" (99-100).

Despite the socially constructed belief of "maternal love," Théoret's narrator observes, as in *Une Voix pour Odile*, loveless and sometimes violent relations between parents and children. She witnesses: "La violence physique. On dompte les enfants. Là d'où je viens, les enfants sont des fauves. Animaux sauvages. On claque. On fesse. On menace. On terrorise. [. . .] on prive. On punit pour des riens" (49). Théoret suggests here that the cruel mothers depicted in works like Blais's *La Belle Bête* and Anne Hébert's *Le Torrent* are perhaps not so rare. Children are a duty for women, and not necessarily desired ones. One recurring figure throughout the entire novel is a 74-year old woman who talks to the narrator about her own mother's life several generations ago. "Ma mère aimait ses enfants. [. . .] C'était l'époque à la campagne. Une femme ne pouvait pas tellement faire autrement. Si elle en a voulu autant? Une femme ne se demandait pas ça" (40). This marks a generational shift between the older woman and the narrator who expresses no desire to marry or have children; in fact, the thought of this destiny scares her. Already assisting with taking care of the household and her younger brothers as a child, by the time she reaches adolescence, the narrator realizes that her life is not going to change. She will become like her mother and she will be nothing but obedient her entire life: "À treize ans, je vois qu'il n'y a rien d'autre. Je commence à ne plus reconnaître quoi que ce soit. Ça ne peut être que ça. C'est impossible et pourtant. Chaque jour. Et on me commande et j'obéis." (16). The realization that her entire childhood has been based on the unquestioning compliance that is

preparing her for an adult life of dutiful behavior prompts her to note that "Ma jeunesse a été mangée et ravagée" (21). This is the start of the narrator's process to reclaim her adult life through language and through the maintenance of her independence.

Théoret's narrator resents the compulsion of having to be obedient, both as a child and as an adult, toward men. Besides "Il," understood to be the narrator's father (by capitalizing this pronoun, Théoret emphasizes his God-like power), there are the drunken men at the bar where she works and to whom she must always be overly accommodating; she resents this obligatory, forced politeness. This deference to men is illustrated in a more extreme manner when she receives a phone call from a childhood friend who, she learns, was raped at the age of 11 by a family member, married and divorced by the time her third child was born because her husband left her for a younger woman, and then kicked out of her parents' home. With no vocational training, she would commit suicide if she did not have children for whom to care. Although her story is a sad one, it is a typical one, according to Théoret's narrator, "pas même une histoire digne des faits divers. Du tissage quotidien. Très proche, une âme sœur tendrement aimée. Vivre venu du cul, les filles" (35). While it is the love (or at least sense of responsibility) of the narrator's friend for her children that prevents her from committing suicide, the narrator feels no such love between herself and her own mother. Although the narrator is presumably an adult (or at least of child-bearing age, like her friend), she identifies strongly with her role as a daughter, focusing much energy upon her relationship with her own parents (especially her mother), rather than as a potential mother-to-be, which is consistent with all of Théoret's protagonists.

The only direct interactions between the narrator and her own mother in *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* are two brief conversations about the narrator's professional future: "Je dis à ma mère que je voudrais devenir religieuse. Elle dit oui, oui et elle continue le travail. Je me tais,

n'insiste pas. Je n'en reparlerai jamais, elle non plus" (34). Although the narrator has but a brief interest in religion, the fact that her mother says nothing more than "Oui, oui" as a response and does not stop her work to talk indicates that she does not support this idea, likely because it is the alternative from what she herself has done in life (married and had children). A year later when the mother notes that at age 18, the narrator is old enough to marry, she mentions that after marriage, a woman "ne doit pas travailler [. . .] c'est l'affaire de l'homme de gagner la vie" (30). When the narrator explains why she disagrees, her mother dismisses her words: "'Tais-toi tu ne sais pas qu'est-ce que tu dis.' [. . .] Si je parle, je sais que je parlerai toute seule. [. . .] Je venais de perdre ma crédibilité auprès de celle que je considérais depuis toujours comme mon alliée naturelle" (30). The narrator's rejection of the traditional experience for women breaks the sense of alliance between herself and her mother. These two women fail to understand one another. The protagonist's dismissal of the values of her mother (and of the women of older generations in general) relates to her goals of independence and her search for a language with which women can genuinely communicate.

As in *Une Voix pour Odile*, Théoret plays with the language and syntax in *Nous parlerons comme on écrit*, which consists of six sections of fragmented writing that is often difficult to follow, as the story jumps from past to present, although reoccurring characters do appear. Literary critic and scholar Catherine Den Tandt provides a justification for this style of writing embraced by Théoret; she suggests that "the telling of women's stories cannot be told. This story has to be created from ground zero, and the process is painful, splintered, shattered, and ruptured" (97). Théoret's "roman" explores the relationship between discourse and identity. Throughout the entire text of *Nous parlerons comme on écrit*, the female narrator attempts to find and use language for herself, but the failure to do so renders her literally ill, as she is

hospitalized several times from uncontrollable vomiting, symbolizing her rejection of how she has been taught to behave and speak as a woman. Both Théoret and her narrator eventually spew their thoughts into words upon the pages of their works. Théoret's narrator finds solace both in writing and in reading women writers, specifically Colette and Virginia Woolf, with a female friend who shares her love for literature. As the two pursue their passion for these foreign women writers, Théoret suggests that they explore some physical intimacy as well: "Maintenant, nous sommes dans les bras l'une de l'autre" (42). The love the narrator feels for her female friend and for the women authors she reveres contrasts with that which she feels for the male characters whom Théoret consistently depicts negatively.

In the last section of Théoret's "novel," entitled "Sereines ondes souffertes," the narrator ties together her thoughts on language and mothers:

> Je te dis que les mères de cette communauté n'ont eu d'acces à la parole qu'à partir du silence des pères [. . .] les mères surparlent, les pères absents marmonnent ou rechignent. [. . .] Mais leurs mots tournent, la langue même les écrase. Elles parlent en dehors d'elles, malgré elles . . . Elles laissent glisser tant et tant qu'elles s'y perdent comme n'ayant plus de fin et elles sont mangées elles-mêmes d'être sans fin. (163)

The narrator recognizes that it is not the fault of this generation of women that women have no control over the language that is overused to the point where it consumes them: "Sans doute ce qu'elles avaient reçu, voilà comment elles parlent" (164). Through this reflective, fragmented text, the narrator hopes to reclaim the language that the generations of women before her could not effectively use. Besides the patriarchal language that the narrator has to fight against and manipulate for her own voice, there are other linguistic considerations that affect the narrator. As a child, she wants to learn Latin but "Il" is outraged when he learns this:

> Il me demande ce que je fais. Je le lui dis. Il éclate de rire qui rit de rage qui rit d'hysterie et il commence à crier, à hurler. Personne ne lui a dit que j'apprends le latin. Qu'est-ce que ça va te donner? À quoi ça va te servir? Je ne peux pas m'échapper. C'est l'inquisiteur. Il faut répondre. [. . .] Car le substitut c'est le bras levé qui va frapper. (18)

The narrator feels humiliated as she realizes that no one speaks Latin anymore, and that she was taking herself out of reality by learning this language. However, through the course of this novel, Théoret removes her narrator even further from reality by embracing a new way of writing and speaking. Besides her interest in Latin, as a child the narrator also devotes herself to foreign authors (Woolf and Colette) and learns English. When the narrator's mother warns her about her travels, she says, "Watch-toé avec les gars" (46). Théoret uses joual to emphasize the difference statuses of Québécois French and English. The narrator is going to learn English, the language of success: "il faut savoir l'anglais pour se débrouiller dans la vie" (47), whereas her mother's use of joual reinforces her fixed status as a working-class wife and mother. A trip to Mexico, however, prompts the narrator's realization of how difficult it is for her to express herself with language both abroad and at home: "Montréal n'est pas grande lorsqu'on revient de Mexico. [. . .]Une toute jeune fille recommence d'apprendre à vivre. [. . .] Elle se mange les lèvres, elle grince, griche des dents dans la nuit, elle se ronge les ongles jusqu'au sang, ele bégaie, hésite quand elle parle. Les lendemains chanteront" (232). The use of the third-person to describe the narrator here recurs throughout this novel; the narrator's story shifts between "je" and "elle" which blurs further the self-identification of the narrator. As she becomes "elle," she is displaced from herself, but also becoming a universal symbol, representative of all women. In her chapter on France Théoret in *Writing in the Feminine*, Gould claims that the significance of

the narrator's journey from Mexico City to Montreal is due to the fact of Mexico's subordinate status in North America:

> Mexico was the place where the narrator came to understand what it means to be locked out of discourse as Mexico itself is with respect to the capitalist discourse of the United States. Her linguistic dispossession as a woman and as a Québécoise [. . .] is thus likened to the linguistic dispossession of Mexico itself, a country that constitutes little more than a silent presence in English-speaking North America. (232)

While Gould gives a compelling analysis, it is also likely that simply traveling in a Spanish-speaking country would prompt this realization; upon returning to her native Quebecc, Théoret's protagonist stutters and hesitates when she speaks. After being a linguistic outsider in Mexico, she feels eager to express herself in her native language. Yet she still has difficulties communicating because her "native language" has never truly belonged to her. A further example of how the narrator feels disconnected from Québécois French is her observance of how men and women are taught language. She sees as a bartender that men "apprennent à parler au bar. [. . .] Boire et être un homme ça ne se sépare pas" (22). The women, rather than drinking and talking together themselves, focus on the men: "Les femmes et les jeunes filles surtout prient pour qu'ils ne boivent pas" (22). Théoret emphasizes the segregation of men and women in social spheres by juxtaposing what constitutes normal social behavior for men (drinking and talking) with women's abstinence both of alcohol and of conversations that do not focus on the behaviors of men.[65]

Nous Parlerons comme on écrit is an attempt to find a discourse for women that counterbalances the imposed language of compliance and that will, as the title suggests, shift into spoken discourse. Théoret's style of writing breaks with traditional forms, yet there are many

intertextual references to other (mostly female, foreign) authors. Besides the overt praise of female authors such as Woolf, Colette, and Anaïs Nin, Théoret's narrator embraces another traditionally "feminine" form of writing: epistolary communication.[66] "Une Histoire dans la boule verte" is written in the form of letters between two female friends, Louise and Lise-Anne, in which they discover the pleasure of sharing themselves through written words. Despite the accusations of "Il" that their act of writing letters as a waste of time (much like his outrage when he discovered that his daughter was learning Latin), the two girls continue to correspond with one another. Similarly to the narrator and her friend (possibly the same one) who read and play-act Colette and Virginia Woolf, the two girls embrace an actively woman-centered communication that is contrary to the unquestioning obedience they have been taught by their parents. This bitterness of having to be obedient to men reappears as a theme in Théoret's essay entitled "La Raison appropriée" in which Théoret explains her need to write women's suffering because women are expected to obey unquestioningly:

> Écrire la souffrance des femmes. Écrire cette abjection . . . C'est entendu, devant la souffrance de sa fille, le Bon Père demande un sourire. [. . .] Le plus souvent une fille acquiesce ne désirant causer un souci de plus au Père qui, à cause de son role justement est chargé de soucis. Sa fille est sa petite joie. Comment ose-t-elle le décevoir par un regard fermé? (14).

The act of writing, whether it is Théoret's young protagonists communicating with each other in letters despite the fact that the authoritative "Il" claims it is a waste of time, or Théoret herself creating these theoretical-fictional works, is an assertion of self in an oppressive environment.

Une Voix pour Odile and *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* are among Théoret's best-known works. Although classified by Théoret as fictional works, they read as train-of-thought

personal essays with no discernable plot other than the introspective journey of the author-narrator. A later text, *Étrangeté, l'étreinte* (1992), includes texts that waver between poetry and prose, as each poem consists of several paragraphs of mostly complete sentences. Each page has one paragraph at the very top, while the rest of the page is blank. If Théoret had placed the paragraphs one right after the other on the same page, these works would read as essays. Defying genre is another way that Théoret rejects traditional writing, yet at times the originality of the style detracts from the content. The quest for a feminist language remains privileged in the poems of *Étrangeté, l'étreinte* in which Théoret expresses frustration as writing as a woman: "Dans le tourment d'une femme, gestation sans langage, là où l'envol serait rupture. Le délire intérieur tue lentement" ("Des nerfs à vif" 85). In her most recent works, Théoret is less preoccupied with language. Rather, she focuses more on the themes of personal independence and the rejection of marriage and children that are maintained throughout her entire corpus.

Théoret's later novels, including *Laurence* (1996) and *Les Apparatchiks vont à la mer noire* (2004) are considerably more accessible than her other, earlier works; Théoret plays less with form and maintains a format typical of traditionally-written novels. *Laurence*, set against the backdrop of 1930s Quebecc, reflects the changing attitudes and especially the evolving economic situation during the Great Depression when women needed to work (and were, to an extent, able to do so). This novel's feminist themes appear much more subtly than in Théoret's earlier works and somewhat sporadically, through the thoughts of the outwardly mostly-obedient Laurence. For example, Théoret strays from the storyline when Laurence contemplates her younger, more outgoing sister, Odette; through Laurence's thoughts, Théoret expresses her opinions about the differences permitted to young men and young women:

L'expression "faire sa vie de jeunesse" consacrait le droit au plaisir des jeunes

> hommes avant de se marier, un droit à l'amusement mesuré au temps disponible et aux possibilités économiques. [. . .] Laurence parlait d'avoir une vie de jeunesse, une nuance qui rétablissait une difference entre hommes et femmes. Il valait mieux conserver sa virginité. En groupe, elles ne mentionnaient pas le mot, se contaient les embarras des jeunes filles engrossées. (232)

By writing the protagonist in a more traditional third-person narrative form as opposed to the first-person narratives of *Une voix pour Odile* and *Nous parlerons comme on écrit*, Théoret invites her readers of *Laurence* to consider her text more as a story about a young woman and less as a personal and theoretical quest. Théoret's preoccupation with women's vocational options is quickly reintroduced in this text as limited: "Tôt ou tard, les filles s'orientaient vers le mariage ou la vie religieuse, prenaient l'initiative d'une décision" (20), but Laurence chooses an unusual path and works as a nurse for a doctor and continues to take medical courses throughout the novel. Like all of Théoret's protagonists, Laurence is determined to support herself financially and strives for independence. Her decision to go to a convent for medical training is met by anger by her father, who finally allows her to go on the condition that she send home her entire salary. Laurence obeys him but begins to assert her independence little by little, by thinking of herself and her own needs:

> Un jour où l'austérité l'emportait sur sa foi en l'avenir, [Laurence] reçut du père une lettre de colère. Il exigeait des comptes, elle avait soustrait une piastre et cinquante centes de l'envoi précédent. Vindicatif, il lui rappelait son engagement et son devoir en des mots laconiques et solonnels. La fille s'expliqua avec simplicité, l'argent avait servi à l'achat de sous-vêtements, des culottes de coton jaune. (47)

Laurence's simple explanation belies the increasingly frustrated and resentful feelings she has toward the act of giving up her entire salary. Taking place during the Great Depression, *Laurence* remains consistent with the traditional motif of *misère* in canonical Québécois texts that romanticize the poverty of Quebecc (such as Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* and Gabrielle Roy's *Boheur d'occasion*). By focusing on the necessity of work and money, Théoret provides a familiar background to her readers. There is never enough money for Laurence's family, and Laurence is unable to enjoy her own hard earned money because of her obligation to her father, which he interprets as an example of his effective and successful parenting: "Le premier novembre, Léon Naud vint lui-meme chercher le salaire de sa fille qui en fut attristée, il n'avait pas différé d'un seul jour. Au nom d'une permission accordée dix ans plus tôt, il recevait l'argent sans remerciement. [. . .] Il se félicitait de la fidélité de Laurence" (151). Due to the country's economic hardships, Laurence is dependent on moving to where there is work, finally living in Montreal despite her parents' misgivings about the dangers of a single woman living in a big city. Laurence does want to help her family, but she eventually thinks more of herself and becomes completely self-supporting.

In her article entitled "Beyond the Name of the Father: France Théoret's *Laurence*," Lori Saint-Martin observes that Laurence takes on the role of a symbolic father by providing money to her family and by offering other material means of support. Besides giving up her salary to her father (allowing him to remain in control of her finances), Laurence provides financially for her sister, Odette, who comes to live with her in Montreal, offering her food, clothes, and classes.[67] Besides providing money and serving as a father figure in the sense of a financial supporter, Laurence becomes a symbolic mother to her nephew. Laurence's brother and sister-in-law have children whom they love but do not care for appropriately. Laurence is shocked by their neglect

of their youngest son who at age three is still never taken out of his filthy crib, but they blame his developmental delays on his being sick and not on their own neglect. They allow Laurence to take her nephew with her into the city, convinced that she can take better care of him and allow him to thrive. However, he does not make progress: "Laurence qui s'était attachée à Jérôme, à ses progrès, à son doux visage, s'en separa à contre-coeur. Le petit garçon ne protesta pas. Sa débilité évidente maintenant lui fut pénible. Elle pensa à l'avenir qui l'attendait, un immense frisson de douleur la parcourut" (213). There is no hope for her nephew, despite Laurence's best efforts and her genuine love for him. This is the closest any of Théoret's progatonists get to being a parent, and in this case, Théoret depicts caring for a young child as a futile and heart-breaking endeavor.

Consistent with Théoret's other depictions of men, Laurence's father is an angry man whose violent temper has turned physical toward his children who are afraid of him; Laurence's mother represses her anger, suffering silently to the point where she becomes physically ill. Gould notes that while Laurence represents modernity, choosing to work and live unmarried in Montreal, her mother "is descriptively linked to the quiet, cloistered space of the convent and the rigidity of rural, conservative values. Although less judgmental of her daughters than her husband, Rosalie is nonetheless resigned to a way of life that resists difference or change" (1990 p. 100). To help her sick mother, Rosalie, Laurence leaves her work temporarily in order to travel home. While Laurence expresses love toward her mother, she remains conflicted between wanting to be independent and wanting to help: Laurence "songeait à sa mère, une femme infatigable, usée par le travail. [. . .] elle aurait secondé la mère et lui aurait évité l'épuisement ou bien, comme maintenant, elle destinait à la famille son salaire mensuel, un support économique nécessaire" (19). This guilt is complicated by her resentment of the fact that her father has never

once thanked her for relinquishing her entire salary. Laurence is overwhelmed by the fact that the only familial conversations concern *la misère* of the family. Like Florentine in Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion,* Laurence's feelings for her mother waiver between frustration and sympathy. Caring for her mother, Laurence observes that, "Rosalie se plaignit de la besogne trop lourde. Pathétique, vieillie, les bras décharnés et le ventre enflé, elle offrait l'évidence d'une femme dépassée par ses activités, sacrifiée à autrui" (71). Laurence is determined not to follow in her mother's footsteps.

With constant money problems and too many mouths to feed, Laurence's parents plan the destinies of their children. Despite the fact that Laurence has been employed as a nurse, they consider her to be vocationless, compared to her sisters who are in convents and training to be nuns. Laurence must get married in order to have a secure future. The fact that she is 23 and quickly reaching the status of an old maid makes this requirement even more urgent. Although they encourage Laurence to get married, Laurence determines to continue her work as a nurse and to remain single. Although outwardly Laurence remains silent and obedient, much like when she must give her father her salary, resenting his lack of gratitude, she is inwardly angry and against marriage: "[Laurence] ne perpétuerait pas ce qu'elle considérait comme un asservissement des femmes qui engendraient des enfants pour la misère et peut-être pour la guerre. L'idée d'un mariage avec un garçon du village la révoltait. " (73). Although she later confronts her angry father, telling him that she does not want to get married, her love for her mother and siblings keeps her at home. When Laurence eventually returns to work, her boss acts as a contrasting father figure to Laurence; the doctor and his wife give her clothing and kindness. When Laurence needs extra money to send home to her sister who has broken her collar bone,

the doctor quickly gives her extra on the condition that she keep some money for herself; he understands that her family's expectation to receive Laurence's entire salary is unjust.

Although Théoret quickly introduces her protagonist's misgivings toward marriage to her readers, Laurence is not without romantic interests. In fact, another aspect of this novel's accessibility is the fact that the start of this novel appears like a romance novel. Théoret elaborates on the descriptions of Laurence's courtship and romance with Gaston: "Il est difficile d'expliquer comment, à vingt-trois ans, elle n'avait pas songé à l'amour. [. . .] Elle n'était pas obsedée par son âge, les années qui filent et font une vieille fille d'une célibataire de vingt-cinq ans" (34). The two of them go out regularly and even discuss marriage. Yet Gaston's mother is against this coupling, allegedly because Laurence appears too thin to bear children; Laurence suspects that her family's disadvantaged socioeconomic background may be the actual cause of this disapproval. Despite this, they remain together until they are separated after the stock market crashes and they must part ways due to economic necessity (they both must travel to find jobs elsewhere). While Laurence expresses disgust at the idea of marrying someone from her home village, she is not against the idea of marriage with Gaston: "Ils parlèrent de Bonheur et de marriage. Ils y croyaient au Bonheur, à une maison, avec des enfants qui chanteraient, joueraient de la musique et pratiqueraient des sports. Une pudeur covrait les mots. Ils auraient des enfants, l'expression verbale du désir sexuel passait en termes de la venue des enfants" (109). This is the only passage in any of Théoret's works that expresses desire for marriage. On the other hand, children are never truly desired in Théoret's works. They are an expectation or a euphemism for (and inevitable outcome of) sexual activity.

Théoret's motif of unwanted children is supported by a subplot in which an old childhood friend of Laurence, Estelle, comes in contact with her. Much like the narrator's friend in *Nous*

parlerons comme on écrit who had been raped, kicked out of her parents' house, and abandoned by her married lover, Estelle has a similarly tragic background. During an affair with a married man, Estelle got pregnant and has since been rejected by both her parents and her lover. Estelle is traveling to the Miséricorde Hospital to give birth.[68] When Laurence attempts to join her friend and offer her help, it is too late: Estelle has killed herself and her unborn baby. Laurence is horrified by the sight of her friend dead on a bench and blames "des mœurs hypocrites d'une société catholique et civilisée" (123). Théoret additionally observes the hypocrisy of a society that turns a blind eye to sexual injustices committed by men against women. When Laurence is attacked and raped by two men (her first sexual experience), she is physically hurt and her determination to remain an independent woman augments. She is once again disturbed by the double standards of social expectations for men and women: "L'idée qu'elle put être renvoyée de l'école l'effleura. On virait des étudiantes pour beaucoup moins. Le viol, un sujet de scandale, menait à l'exclusion. Il y avait des erreurs qu'on ne pardonnait pas, qui recevaient des sanctions immédiates. Laurence le savait, l'imposture protégait les agresseurs" (142). The burden of the rape is carried with Laurence throughout the rest of the novel, yet she does not discuss it with anyone immediately except for the doctor that helps her after the rape. Knowing that she is no longer a virgin, he later convinces her to have sex with him. Théoret's male characters speak frankly and often of sex: this doctor speaks of medical benefits to regular sexual activity; Laurence's brother speaks often of the importance of engaging in sexual activity regularly; a later boyfriend, Louis Brodeur, also speaks frankly of the need for sexual liberation and against the sexual repression caused by the sanctions of the Catholic church. Laurence is struck by the openness of these men's discussions of sex, but she remains uncomfortable broaching the topic herself. Her brother Édouard continuously harasses her about not being yet married. She finally

brings herself to explain to him that she had been raped, but she gets no support or even a response from her brother: "Edouard se renfrogna et fut silencieux, sans réaction. [. . .] Édouard ne lui reprocha rien, il refusa de l'entendre . . . Le lendemain, Édouard ne fit pas la moindre allusion à l'objet de leur entretien, sembla l'avoir oublié." (210). Laurence's rape, while traumatic, does not prohibit her from being an agent of her own sexual desires; indeed, as Karen Gould observes, "it seems that with each new affair and its subsequent termination, Laurence grows more self-sufficient and less anxious about her solitude" (1990 p.104). Part of this self-sufficiency is developed through Laurence's reclamation of her sexuality; she grow comfortable enough to recognize her own sexual needs and desires, and engages sexually with men while maintaining her own independence.

The doctor who assists her after the rape and with whom she later has sexual relations gives Laurence a copy of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In a somewhat strange digression, Théoret spends the middle of her novel (chapters 10 and 11 in this book of 20 chapters) praising *Les Misérables* as an inspirational – indeed, a life changing – novel for Laurence. Laurence identifies strongly with Hugo's Jean Valjean, and sees herself as a heroic sufferer as well: "Sous la plume de Victor Hugo, [Valjean] est l'archétype de l'homme injustement traité et jugé par ses contemporains. [. . .] Des Jean Valjean, il en existait beaucoup, des hommes et des femmes sans ressources que les mœurs religieuses et sociales subordonnaient, que la crise économique vouait à la désespérance" (188-9). Laurence understands the parallels between the economic hardships of Quebecc and the poverty that much of the French proletariat of Hugo's novel was suffering a century earlier. The "mœurs religieuses" that are emphasized in Hugo's novel also impact Laurence's quiet rebellion. In addition to her rejection of marriage, Laurence's other "nontraditional" beliefs are about religion. While (perhaps because) her father especially reveres

nuns and priests, and therefore favors Laurence's sisters who are training to be nuns, Laurence refuses to attend mass. She becomes close to a boyfriend due to their agreement that the Catholic Church wields too much money and has too much power. She also recognizes that her own medical training, which took place within convents, has made her an implicit hypocrite of the "compassion" of Catholics, as the nurses are told to deny anesthesia and drugs to unwed mothers: "Les femmes attendaient l'enfant du péché, il paraissait juste qu'elles souffrent des consequences du plaisir illicite" (133). Her own medical education has left her ignorant of sociopolitical realities, and she must teach herself everything that is not related to medical care. Part of her attraction to her boyfriend Louis Brodeur comes from her admiration of his extensive library; *Les Misérables* gives Laurence the thirst for more knowledge and pleasure through learning to which, as a working-class woman, she has had limited exposure.

Théoret depicts Odette, Laurence's youngest sister, as the embodiment of the naiveté caused by a Catholic education. She comes to live in Montreal with Laurence, who is shocked by her openness to men and her general ignorance. By the end of the book, Théoret focuses increasingly on Laurence's younger sister Odette and her marriage. While Laurence has denounced the institution of marriage and has worked hard to be successful at supporting herself, her younger, coupled-then-married sister is privileged. It might seem that the valorization of the choice Théoret's protagonists make to remain "vieilles filles" is contradicted by the emphasis on Odette's relationship. Yet Théoret stresses that Odette's marriage is not a happy one, as she ends up with constant financial struggles as her husband gambles every night and worries for her children's safety in an urban environment. There is a striking juxtaposition between Laurence's successfully and satisfactory independent existence and Odette's unhappy marriage. Although the novel ends with a focus on Odette and not on Laurence, the last scene is of Odette screaming

at her husband; of the two sisters, it is clear to Théoret's readers that Laurence has made the wiser life choice.

Théoret's *Les Apparatchiks vont a la mer noire* (2004), is, like *Laurence*, "traditionally" written in terms of language, but subtly subversive. Like *Laurence* also, this novel appears as a traditional love story; Théoret's protagonist Louise loves both intellectualism and Mathieu, who becomes her husband, but Théoret suggests that Louise cannot have both: "Elle tremblait à l'idée de choisir entre l'un et l'autre désir" (15). By privileging Louise's relationship with Mathieu, and then Mathieu himself, Théoret makes it quickly apparent that it is not possible for a woman to devote herself both to a marriage and to her intellectual work; Louise's love for books is completely overshadowed by her relationship Mathieu and by Mathieu's scholarly work. Louise learns that her husband does not respect her intellect, but rather, he is infatuated with the idea of her as Woman: "Dans les lettres de Mathieu, elle lisait qu'il l'idéalisait, qu'elle était la Femme, qu'il ne s'adressait pas à elle, plutôt à une idée hiérarchique, immobile. Elle était une femme surréelle, mythique, de tous temps, de toutes latitudes, unie à l'origine, au ventre" (45). While Théoret frames the beginning and the end of the novel with Louise's point of view, the bulk of this novel consists of Mathieu's life as a professor, his intellectual work, and his dissertation. As Mathieu progresses in his profession, Théoret no longer focuses on Louise. After Mathieu obtains the couple's shared dream of becoming an intellectual, Louise leaves him. It is only then that Théoret introduces Mathieu's perspective on his wife (as opposed to his intellectual work). In the aftermath of their separation and then during their divorce hearing, Mathieu expresses his disappointment in Louise's priorities; she has apparently neglected some of her domestic duties in order to pursue her own intellectual career. By offering some of Louise's book titles to the court as concrete evidence of Louise's failure as a wife, Mathieu

supports the idea repeated throughout the body of Théoret's works that women cannot both write professionally and be married. This notion is further supported by Mathieu's relationship with one of his students, Judith, who encourages him to finish his dissertation. At first, Mathieu is revived by Judith's enthusiasm and motivation, comparing her favorably to his ex-wife: "En surimpression, il voyait Louise qui ne défendait pas ses idées. Louise, sa femme silencieuse. Devant lui, Judith s'exclamait, élaborait son discours. [. . .] Il décida qu'en vertu du contraste nouveau l'entrain de la jeune femme le stimulait, le propulsait vers l'action" (115). However, Mathieu quickly changes his mind, finding Judith more pushy than helpful, and his opinion that women have no business in the realm of intellectualism is renewed: "Il arriva à Mathieu de se demander si l'esprit combatif de Judith était compatible avec un corps de femme" (117-8). Through Mathieu's disdain for Judith and Louise's academic endeavors, Théoret confirms that women's intellectual contributions are not valued.

At the final section of the novel, the narration shifts suddenly from third-person to first-person, and the "je" who speaks is not Mathieu. Rather, Théoret's novel has come full-circle and it is Louise whose voice is heard for the first time since her musings on love in the first chapter. The reader finally learns what happened to the woman introduced in the beginning of the novel as a lover of both books and Mathieu. These questions are answered fully as the first-person narrator describes completely her emotions, providing a contrast to the relatively fact-driven third-person narrative of Mathieu's story. This move into the realm of emotive writing is also a nod to "feminine" writing as Théoret invites the readers into Louise's psyche: "J'avais soif de raconter ce qui s'était passé. Je ne me reconnaissais pas. [. . .] Je sentis passer sur moi un instant de noir déséquilibre" (183). After a trauamatic day in court, Louise thinks of and longs for her mother. Louise has always known that she resembles her mother physically but has resisted the

notion that she resembles her mother personality-wise. Louise recalls how her mother was always submissive and resentful, "une femme accablée" (185). Louise's father had lent a con man a great deal of money, which was never repaid; Louise remembers how the resentment of her mother grew although she never spoke about it. Louise has been similarly betrayed by her own husband; she has failed to thrive as an independent woman and is a "femme humiliée, trop soumise" (185), just like her mother. Determined to be independent, Louise realizes that marriage has harmed her. A phone call to a female colleague reinforces this notion: "Lysanne ne s'était pas mariée, n'avait pas cohabité avec un homme ou avec une femme. [. . .] Elle était célibataire, satisfaite de son choix. [. . .] L'idée du partage de son lieu privé avec quelqu'un correspondait à un empiétement" (190). By introducing a character who had not made the same mistakes as Louise, Théoret recalls the importance of women's independence.

Louise is determined to divorce her husband, but Mathieu does not want to divorce officially. She finds no support from her family or friends, who are all against the institution of divorce. Louise cannot even find support from other women who identify as feminists: "Les journalistes féministes, en particular, éludaient la question du mariage et, par conséquent, celle du divorce" (161). Mathieu accuses Louise of neglecting her domestic duties in order to write (indeed, after she leaves him Mathieu is overwhelmed by the mess of his apartment and the disorder of his clothing). Mathieu is determined to make Louise appear as guilty as possible and, during the hearing, he shows his wife's books to the court as evidence of her failure as a wife: "Mathieu se vengea lors du procès de divorce. Il produisait au tribunal mes premiers livres pour faire la prevue des méfaits dont je m'étais rendue coupable" (167). Théoret never explicitly describes the content of the books, which heightens the absurdity of this condemnation of Louise. While pursuing her own intellectual profession, Louise neglected her role as a wife. In

court, "J'étais assiégée par les traditions familiales, les rôles impartis au sexe féminin" (173). Although her husband has pursued his own professional path as much, or more, than herself, the court only recognizes her familial neglect: "Dès le début du procès, le juge avait été dérouté par ma conduite, une conduite d'homme, avait-il dit, pour qualifier plusieurs de mes initiatives" (194). Once again, Théoret reiterates her notion that women are condemned by this double standard and therefore must remain independent in order to successfully write, create, and exist autonomously.

The relatively subtle feminist themes of *Laurence* and *Les Apparathiks vont à la mer noire* are more effective than those more overtly stated in Théoret's earlier works, primarily because of their accessibility. Théoret abandons the preoccupation with language and writing that pervades her earlier texts while maintaining the motif that marriage is detrimental to women's independence and happiness. Théoret's protagonists, both Laurence and Louise, are strong, independent women who refuse to give into the societal expectations of them, despite the discouraging and even prohibitive behaviors of the men in their lives (Laurence's father and Louise's husband). Yet these two women are not immune from love or attraction to men. Indeed, Théoret writes frankly about their sexual desires and experiences. Yet her female protagonists remain single; Théoret prefers her female characters to devote themselves to their own independence and livelihood, rather than to men, and to create and nurture books rather than children. In *Les Apparatchiks vont à la mer noire*, Mathieu says that "Une femme qui écrit est une menace pour son mari" (169-70) but Théoret would likely change this sentence to: "Une femme qui écrit est menacée par son mari."

Chapter 5

Infanticides at the Turn of the 21st Century: *L'Obéissance, L'Ingratitude*, and *Le Livre d'Emma*

At the end of the 20th century in Quebecc, a number of novels feature mothers who commit infanticide. Novels such as Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* (1991), Ying Chen's *L'Ingratitude* (1995) and Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma* (2001) include mothers who kill their own children, either intentionally (Jacob and Agnant) or indirectly (Chen). This chapter is a complement to chapter two, in which I examine two texts published in the 1950s (*La Belle Bête* by Marie-Claire Blais and *Le Torrent* by Anne Hébert) that explore the opposite phenomenon: that of matricide. Those children (who are older adolescents in both works), frustrated with the abuse (emotional in the case of Blais's novel; emotional and physical in Hébert's text) make the decision to kill their mothers. In both cases, this decision is the result of a lifetime of neglect and/or abuse that has culminated in desperation. While the points of view of the mothers in those texts are not privileged, I argue that the degrees of guilt of both the children and the mothers in those texts are more complex than, for example, the unambiguously cruel stepmother and martyred daughter in the film and novel based on the legend of Aurore Gagnon produced during the same time period. Blais hints that Isabelle-Marie's resentment may be somewhat unwarranted. Furthermore, Blais qualifies Isabelle-Marie's victimhood as she lies, despises her own ugly daughter, violently disfigures her brother and then kills her mother. As for *Le Torrent*, Hébert writes Claudine with more sympathy than she does François. Although violent and irrational toward her son, Claudine desires success for him; François, in turn, kills his mother and then becomes so emotionally and mentally unstable that it is difficult to empathize

with him. Rather, Hébert critiques openly the religious values of a society that punishes unwed mothers. Blais critiques the valorization of women's physical appearances. In both texts, the cruel mothers subvert the normative roles of women while serving to illustrate societal problems that extend beyond the household.

The three novels studied in this chapter span a single decade (1991-2001) and continue the notion that the cruelty of the mothers in these texts may be at least partially due to other factors, namely, the limited roles of women and the undervalued status of women in society. These novels stress, too, the potential of mother-daughter love that, despite its constructed idealization, is never realized. In the works of Jacob and Chen, the daughters adore their mothers despite the abuse (Jacob) and control (Chen), although the mothers' love for their daughters appears qualified. The lack of reciprocity in the mother-daughter relationships is due to an understanding that the mothers' role is to mold their daughters into obedient women. The mothers' strictness is a tool to train their daughters to become docile and compliant. The mother-daughter relationships in these two novels recall Michel Foucault's explanation of the relationship between those who dominate and those who obey in *L'Histoire de la sexualité* (his examples include "l'enfant en face des parents" (112)): "Tous les modes de domination, de soumission, d'assujettissement se ramèneraient finalement à l'effet d'obéissance" (113). However, the protagonists' frustration with this expectation of women's behavior reflects a critique of traditional gender roles. As for Agnant, her protagonist drowns her young daughter because she understands that it is better to be dead than to grow up black and female in a racist, sexist world. As adult women unhappy with their own lives, the mothers in all three novels have conflicting feelings toward having their daughters grow up to experience the same disappointments.

These three novels take part of a literary trend; toward the end of the 20th century in Quebecc, the point of view of the mother emerges in literature, as opposed to those 1950s novels that do not provide the mothers' points of view (the readers must interpret the degree of their cruelty through the somewhat skewed perspective of the children) and even more on the contrary to earlier *romans du terroir* in which the martyred mother figures play a minor, and often silenced, role. In her essay on Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance*, Lori Saint-Martin observes: "it is extremely troubling that the emergence of infanticide in the Quebecc novel is contemporaneous with the articulation of the mother's point of view in literature" (196). I argue, however, that the violence within these texts serves to illustrate the oppression still felt by women, which renders the mother figures even less villainous than those in the texts by Blais and Hébert. In each of these novels published at the turn of the 21st century, the child who dies is a daughter, and each death symbolizes a rejection of society's rigid expectations of women. The crime of infanticide is more horrific than the contrary (Saint-Martin notes that, "A culture which persists in seeing mothers as paragons of smiling altruism cannot easily assimilate maternal violence. [. . .] violent rejection by a child of its mother shocks us much less than the converse" ("Les Deux femmes" 196-7)). However, each author creates a situation in which the readers feel sympathetic for both the mothers and the daughters, rendering the degree of culpability of the mothers ambiguous. The mothers here, despite having caused directly or indirectly the deaths of their daughters, are not evil villains. Rather, they, like their daughters, are victims of a patriarchal society that values women primarily for their role as mothers. This limited valorization of women is articulated by French theorist and author Luce Irigaray In *Le Corps à corps avec la mère* (published in 1981), who explains that women's value is limited to the household: "La plupart des femmes sont des reproductrices d'enfants. [. . .] Elles ne sont valorisées ni comme travailleuses, ni comme

citoyennes, ni dans la vie politique" (85).[69] This restricted identity and institutionalized motherhood described by Irigaray recalls *Of Woman Born* in which Adrienne Rich claims: "institutionalized motherhood demands of women maternal 'instinct' rather than intelligence, selflessness rather than self-realization, relation to others rather than the creation of self" (42). Women are valued primarily for their roles as mothers, but even women's liberties within that role are limited.

As illustrated in these three novels, women's "maternal instinct" is repressed when, unable to express their frustration with their husbands and with their lives in general, mothers instead retaliate against their daughters. According to Saint-Martin, "Maternal violence is [. . .] a kind of safety valve which prevents women from turning their anger against men" (114). Each of the mothers within these three novels feels frustrated with her male partner, however, she focuses her frustrations upon her daughter. These frustrations result from conflicting feelings: the mother wants her daughter to assimilate into society but simultaneously resents the rigid roles for women. Irigaray suggests that a geniune mother-daughter relationshp is impossible: "Mais comment, pour nous les filles, avoir un rapport personnel et se constituer une identité par rapport à quelqu'une qui n'est qu'une fonction?" (Irigaray 86). The authors of each of the novels studied here privilege both mother-as-mother and mother-as-daughter perspectives. The insight we are given about the mothers' own childhoods and relationships with their own mothers makes the events leading up to their daughters' deaths more complex although not less tragic. Despite the tension and abuse in the mother-daughter dynamic, the desire for a loving relationship is evident in each of these three novels. The inability for this relationship to occur is the true cause of the daughters' deaths.

The three novels studied in this chapter, although each written and published in Quebecc, incorporate a different cultural perspective. Suzanne Jacob's work is firmly grounded in Quebecc, focusing on a singular event: a mother ordering her obedient young daughter to drown. However, from the start of the novel, the narrator, Julie, makes a connection between the private (child abuse) and the public (corruption). Julie compares parents who hurt their children to dictators and other corrupt political leaders who hurt their "children" (citizens) due to "bleeding them" financially. In this text, the phenomenon of child abuse is consistently related to global cases of torture and abuse. These comparisons do not diminish the significance of individual cases of child abuse and infanticide; rather, Jacob's protagonists argue for increased awareness of, and action against, abuse at all levels. Ying Chen's *L'Ingratitude* takes place in China and makes no mention of Quebecc specifically, although the protagonist demonstrates an awareness of Western society and culture (she reads Sartre and her father makes references to France and to America). In her article on *L'Ingratitude*, Saint-Martin observes that "Chen gives [her protagonist Yan-Zi] values (privacy, separateness, individuality, and autonomy) which are at least partly Western and which challenge the ways in which [. . .] Chinese society favours the group over the individual, filial responsibilities over autonomy, and duty over pleasure" ("Infanticide, Suicide, Matricide, and Mother-Daughter Love" 64). Yan-Zi, is of adult age (25), but she remains controlled by her strict mother. Emma, in Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, has immigrated to Quebecc from Haiti, and Agnant emphasizes the inability – and the lack of desire – of white Québécois people, particularly those in positions of authority, to understand, and even to simply hear, her perspective as a black woman. Each of these three novels focus on specific cases of suicide/infanticide and relate these tragedies to the condition of women that goes far beyond the borders of Quebecc.

As suggested by its title, *L'Obéissance* is an exploration of obedience. Jacob poses the question of just how importance this trait is, not just in terms of children, but as people or society as a whole. In an interview, Jacob credits a newspaper article as the inspiration for this novel: "[J]'ouvre un journal et j'aperçois un titre écrit en majuscules: 'Je voulais lui apprendre à obéir.' Ça racontait un infanticide. La mère disait qu'elle avait voulu apprendre à sa fille à obéir. Ça m'a donné un choc, parce que la langue le dit tout le temps, mais je ne l'entendais pas, qu'on apprend à obéir" (Saint-Martin and Verduyn 231). Jacob suggests that obedience is a learned (unnatural) behavior. This notion recalls the realization of the narrator in France Théoret's *Une Voix Pour Odile* who is dismayed when whe learns that there is nothing more to life than obeying. The exploration of obedience in Jacob's novel culminates with a mother, Florence, ordering her young daughter, Alice, to walk deeper and deeper into a body of water until she drowns, in a combined act of murder and suicide. In her recollection of the inspiration for this novel, Jacob explains that she began to reflect on how pervasive the role of constructed obedience is worldwide, not just within the family, but as people become complicit with genocides carried out by dictators or Nazis. Her novel begins with the contemplations of Julie, who links together child abuse and the abuse of a people or nation. She recalls Imelda Marcos and the Duvaliers, who took advantage of their role as "parents" of their countries (the Philippines and Haiti respectively) to corrupt their "children:" "Comment un petit couple humain en vient à saigner à mort ses enfants bien-aimés, comment ces enfants bien-aimés laissent leurs parents les saigner à mort, voilà ce que je vais m'obliger à essayer de dire, de redire et de montrer" (11). Julie's musings are interrupted by the sight of a small child in a sandbox with visible cigarette burns on her arms and hands. Julie approaches a nearby adult woman to inquire about the girl, and the woman warns her not to get involved. Julie decides to call Child

Protection Services to intervene, and officials arrive quickly. However, the woman, who then admits to being the girl's mother, sobs, "C'est facile pour vous! Vous n'avez plus qu'à rentrer chez vous, maintenant! Mais prenez donc ma place maintenant que le mal est fait! Attendez que mon mari arrive! [. . .] Ah! c'est facile de régler le sort du monde en passant!" (25). The woman's words linger in Julie's conscience, and she wonders if her phone call did anything to really help the child. Julie also knows that helping a single child will not lessen the silence and apathy regarding child abuse. She also wonders what will happen to the woman once her husband comes home; she knows that abuse is often carried out by multiple family members. Julie consults Marie, her lawyer friend who is currently defending Florence (on trial for the death of her daughter Alice). Julie blames couples in general, as they are not simply romantic partners, but partners in cruelty: "Isolément, chacun est plutôt terne. Mais dès que tu les mets ensemble, dès qu'ils sont unis, ces deux néants, une loi monstrueuse naît de leur relation. C'est la loi du couple" (215-6). This criticism of couples in general pervades Jacob's text. Even if only one person instigates the abuse, the complicity of the other person is equally worthy of blame.

The central part of this novel is entitled "Un fait divers," and is written in the *passé simple* tense. Shorter, less descriptive sentences add to the journalistic feel of this section, which alternates between the point of view of Florence and her young daughter Alice (before Alice drowns). Jacob gives her readers background information about Florence. By providing details about Florence's difficult childhood, particularly her antagonistic relationship with her own mother, Jacob's readers are inclined to pity Florence and, possibly, to be a bit more understanding of how she was led to cause her daughter's drowning. When discussing this case, Marie warns Julie: "Ne te laisse pas avoir, ne te laisse pas faire, ne te laisse pas émouvoir, il n'y a personne, il n'y aura personne, personne. C'est un fait divers" (211). The information offered

makes this case of abuse and infanticide more personal and understandable than the anonymous child in the sandbox spotted by Julie who will have become "une enfant en général, une enfant globale, un concept d'enfant mutilée, et il n'y aura plus lieu de penser ses plaies, étant donné qu'il est difficile d'étendre un baume analgésique et antibiotique réel sur des plaies conceptuelles et d'une enfant considérée comme sa classe plutôt que comme individu" (21).

"Un fait divers" commences with Florence's marriage to Hubert. We learn that Florence grew up poor and that she had worked from a young age as a maid and then as a nude dancer at a bar. Her own mother, Yvonne, mocks her and and criticizes each of the details of the wedding, an event that marks the culmination of their years of disputes: "Ce mariage mettait un terme à vingt années d'âpres négotiations entre elles" (39). Jacob emphasizes the tension between Florence and Yvonne. Yvonne is referred to as "l'origine de tout," which refers to her power over Florence and also recalls the global mother's role in creation by referencing Gustave Courbet's painting, "L'Origine du monde" (1866). Like François's mother in *Le Torrent*, Florence's mother is omniscient: "'La jalousie!' proclaimait sa mère qui lisait dans les pensées au point qu'il valait mieux ne plus penser en sa présence" (56). Florence's mother teases her for wearing white and pretending to be a virgin on her wedding day, although Florence is in fact still a virgin. Hubert has been frustrated by Florence's refusal to have sex with him, "mais il désirait respecter celle qui serait la mère de ses enfants" (46). Although they are not yet married, Hubert is already idealizing (and reducing) Florence's eventual (and in Hubert's eyes inevitable) status as a mother, promoting the virgin/whore dichotomy that desexualizes women who are wives and mothers. Jacobs informs her readers that Florence has been physically abused, as well as emotionally abused, by her mother her entire life.

However, even if the marriage is an escape from her parents, in particular from her mother (Jacob makes very little reference to Florence's father), Florence's marriage resembles a funeral. The narrator notes that the white limousines are "aussi bien pour les mariages que pour les enterrements" (41). Florence feels invisible, and she does not recognize the sight of her own parents because they are emotional strangers to her. At the reception, Florence is left alone while Hubert chooses to enjoy the first dance not with his new wife, but with his sister. She observes Hubert surrounded by his family members, all of whom he loves, and all of whom are cheering for the dancing couple (Hubert and his sister). Hubert does not know about or understand Florence's difficult childhood: "Il n'aurait jamais pu imaginer qu'il n'en était pas de même pour Florence puisqu'il est quasi impossible d'imaginer que le monde est, juste à côté de soi, radicalement différent de ce que l'on en perçoit" (43). To escape the reality of her alienated and abused self, Florence watches hours of television every day. When she and Hubert settle into their home, she insists upon having three sets that are constantly on, so that when she moves from room to room, she has the distraction and noise of the television to prevent her from confronting reality. In opposition to the television sets, Jacob emphasizes Florence's silence.

Both the child in the sandbox and Florence are silent – or silenced. Julie is struck by how she cannot hear the child who is visibly sobbing, and Florence rarely speaks. While the child's silence serves as a metaphor for the cases of child abuse that go unspoken and unacknowledged, Florence has never expressed herself, having learned at a young age that, "il vaut mieux qu'elle n'existe pas, ou alors comme une balle de ping-pong vide, vide, et encore vide" (57). In both cases, Jacob compares the silence to female genital mutilation, suggesting the severity of preventing the self-expression of girls and women. Whether their mouths or genitals, women have been forcibly closed: "On coud bien des vulves ailleurs, pourquoi pas la bouche ici?"

muses Julie, observing the little girl's silent cries. Additionally, Florence's mother has infibulated (presumably figuratively, although Jacob leaves it ambiguous) her daughter: "Florence arrive à la chambre aussi fermée qu'il est possible d'imaginer parce que sa mère l'a infibulée à force de la protéger contre son mari et ses frères" (48). Under the guise of wanting to protect her daughter from all men, including family members, Yvonne participates alone in the abuse of her daughter. Jacob refers to the generally accepted notion that men (even family members) cannot control their sexual urges, yet it is the responsibility of the girl or woman to avoid any abuse. Despite this "couture," Florence and Hubert are able to consummate their marriage. Their relationship, however, quickly turns violent. Abandoning his previous desires to remain respectful of Florence's sexual prerogative, Hubert forces her to dance nude before him, thus keeping her objectified as when she dances nude for men at the bar. He then rapes her. The first marital rape results in pregnancy, and Florence gives birth to a boy, Rémi. Rapidly, Hubert impregnates Florence again, and when Rémi is eleven months old, Florence gives birth to a daughter, Alice.

Florence's love for Alice is immediate, and her identification with her daughter recalls Hébert's *Le Torrent*. In Hébert's novel, as François watches his mother write his name over hers in her old school textbooks, he is struck by her insistence that they are forever connected: "Cette phrase de ma mère me martelait la tête: 'Tu es mon fils. Tu me continues'"(27). In Jacob's novel, Florence sees an immediate connection between her daughter and herself: "'C'est toi, c'est moi, c'est toi, c'est moi, c'est toi.' [Florence] la contemple comme si c'était elle-même qui venait d'arriver sur la terre avec une nouvelle chance" (70). However, Alice quickly disappoints Florence as, unlike her mother, she is daring, carefree, and curious. When Alice breaks a television screen, an object so essential to Florence's life, Florence begins to discipline her

daughter in order to teach her to obey. She becomes very strict, limiting Alice's interactions with other children, as she herself is isolated. Their relationship becomes by far the most significant, even obsessional, element in both of their lives. Florence has never had any control of her own life and so she controls that of her daughter. Her methods become physical, and for punishments she holds Alice's head under ice-cold water and beats her.

In one section of the novel, Jacob presents the point of view of Alice, thereby giving the abused child a voice. Alice justifies her mother's methods of discipline; when she has nightmares that make her cry out in the night or – even worse – wet the bed, her mother holds her head under cold water. Alice invents that these "traitements" will help her, "pour chasser le mal" (85). She defends her mother when her classmates ask her why she is not allowed to participate in their games and activities. Despite the abuse, she adores her mother and thinks she is the most beautiful woman in the world. She understands her mother's moods and emotions; when Florence agonizes over Alice starting school, Alice suspects her mother's fears: "[Alice] ne se laissa pas séduire par sa maîtresse et se garda bien de l'adorer" (91). Alice longs to please her mother, and so she learns to become completely obedient toward Florence.

However, when some classmates tease Alice and Rémi about their mother's vocation, they get into a physical fight. Hours later, Rémi dies after suffering from an internal hemorrhage. Florence blames Alice for the death of Rémi. Jacob emphasizes Florence's longing for control, as she continues to be wary of other people becoming involved in her daughter's life. The school psychologist shows an interest in Alice, saying that she is gifted but also that she has suffered a shock due to her brother's death. Florence prohibits Alice from continuing to see the psychologist because, "Alice n'appartient à personne sauf à Florence" (98). Florence alone must take part in raising her daughter. Her total exclusion of others includes her husband. Hubert

finds Alice's precociousness adorable, but his tolerance of Alice infuriates Florence: "Bien sûr, lui, il n'avait pas à élever sa fille" (72). Hubert, as the father, is excused, indeed prevented from raising his children. When he offers Alice a bicycle for her birthday, Alice says it is not necessary, knowing that Florence will not want her to have it. He buys it anyway, and Florence crushes it by running over the bicycle with the car. Although Hubert does not physically abuse his daughter, he is overall distant and ignores his wife's erratic and strict punishments of Alice. Like the father in the *Aurore* texts, he is puzzled by his wife's abuse of their daughter, and he does not respond actively to it. He is, however, sexually abusive of his wife. He continues to force his wife to dance nude for him until one evening when Alice sees them:

> Alice qui se lève la nuit en proie d'un cauchemar. Elle ouvre la porte de la chambre de ses parents. Florence danse nue. Hubert va la prendre. Florence veut s'échapper, fuir le regard d'Alice. Hubert la force à continuer. Il la tient. Il l'oblige. Il a vu Alice. Il s'est excité davantage. La fin de tout, pour Florence. (179)

Florence feels humiliated and believes that Alice is judging her. This pivotal scene recalls Rich's explanation of the mother-daughter relationship: "It is the mother through whom patriarchy teaches the small female her proper expectations. [. . .] A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her for clues as to what it means to be a woman" (243). The following day, a cold afternoon in November, Florence takes Alice to the lake. Florence tests her daughter's obedience by commanding her to walk into a body of water. Alice's obedience fascinates Florence who wonders how far she will go before she revolts. Alice walks into the water until she has completely submerged herself. The underwater methods of punishment used by Florence have culminated into this final act of murder/suicide.

Jacob never directly presents Alice or Florence's point of view regarding Alice's death. Rather, Marie, assigned to defend Florence, interprets and understands the case: "'Florence, regardez-moi au fond de l'âme: Alice, jamais, ne vous a jugée. Elle a compris que sa vie vous était devenue intolérable. Elle est entrée dans l'eau comme vous l'avez demandé de le faire, c'est ça?'" (180). Marie struggles in her job, as she cannot be impartial. Jacob informs her readers that Marie had also been abused by her own mother. Florence, despite her reticence, is able to confess her crime with the aid of Marie's intuition. In the final section of her novel, entitled "Requiem," Jacob shifts the focus from Florence to Marie and explores how Marie identifies with Alice. Marie, like Alice, learned to justify her mother's abuse and despite the abuse, she has always loved her mother. She says that her father used to hit Marie and her siblings when they could not sleep at night. Her mother's abuse was a method to force them to sleep soundly so that their father would not beat them, and their father only beat them to encourage them to sleep at night, so that they would not get sick and die: "Ma mère me noyait pour empêcher le pire d'arriver. Mon père ne frappait les bébés que parce qu'il croyait que ça les empêcherait de mourir" (246). This illogical explanation (beating children in order to prevent their deaths), exemplifies the extent to which children seek to justify their parents' abuse. Jacob depicts daughters who want nothing more to please their mothers who, in turn, take out their frustrations upon their daughters. Additional confessions from Marie follow: she had an abortion once, and the termination of this pregnancy has haunted her, as she continues to think about that baby girl. The novel ends with a conversation between Marie and Julie. Marie questions, "'Elle ne m'aimera donc jamais? [. . .] J'essaie de la remettre au monde, je n'y arriverai pas. Oh! Julie, je n'y arriverai pas, il faut tout recommencer!' –'Ta fille?" –'Oh non, Julie, ma mère'" (250). Julie's assumption that Marie is referring to her aborted daughter is logical due to Marie's choice

of vocabulary: "j'essaie de la remettre au monde." This final contemplation evokes the loss of both mother and daughter, but here Jacob emphasizes the longing to make peace with one's mother, the love of whom Marie still desperately desires.

Both Jacob's novel and Chen's novel have for titles a single, strong word associated with traits parents attribute to their children. Whereas Jacob's title (*L'Obéissance*) carries what is normally considered to be a positive trait among children, Chen's title (*L'Ingratitude*) has negative connotations. *L'Ingratitude* is written from the perspective of Yan-Zi, a twenty-five year old woman, who is planning her suicide in order to free herself from a controlling society and especially, from her overbearing mother. Chen does not provide a first name for Yan-Zi's mother, which both universalizes her for Chen's readers and emphasizes the emotional distance between Yan-Zi and her mother (similar to Hébert's *Le Torrent* in which François is shocked to learn his mother's first name, as she has previously always seemed an intimidating and imposing authority figure without a past). The narration shifts between Yan-Zi's postmortem observations (the first chapter is Yan-Zi's description of her own death and funeral) and her life, during which she feels alienated from her family and from society. She cannot relate to coworkers, friends or family members, and she strongly resents her mother's control of her. Her mother expects her to remain a virgin until she marries (and her mother is attempting to arrange this marriage), to give up her entire salary (in order to create a large dowry) and to only leave the house when going to work. She has forgotten Yan-Zi's birthday numerous times, "elle qui avait une très bonne mémoire" (20). Yan-Zi recognizes the significance of her mother "forgetting" this day; her mother often remarks that she regrets having given birth to Yan-Zi. When crossing the street, her mother continues to hold Yan-Zi's hand as an adult (despite Yan-Zi's humiliation), and the physical pressure of her mother's hand reveals her power over her daughter: "Ses doigts

pressaient fortement ma paume. J'avais peur que ses ongles solides ne déchirent ma peau et ne s'enfoncent dans ma chair" (95). Because of her mother's suffocating control, and her own desires for independence that cannot be realized, Yan-Zi feels already dead: "La vie passait à côté de moi. [. . .] Je me voyais morte au milieu de la vie" (35). Yan-Zi does not want to marry the man selected by her mother; she longs for the freedom to spend her money and her free time as she wishes. Observing her own parents' marriage and reflecting upon her relationship with her parents, Yan-Zi has no desire to marry or have children, effectively repeating what she has grown up observing. The values of this patriarchal society in which the only power held by women is in the household where it is abused, Yan-Zi resents having been born into a society where she has no real autonomy. "Je comprenais enfin que ma vie ne m'appartient pas entièrement. [. . .] Pourquoi donner une vie en sachant presque dès le début comment cela allait finir?" (24). These rejections of cultural and filial traditions mark Yan-Zi's marginalization and drive her to plan her suicide.

Chen stresses the tension between Yan-Zi and her mother that causes Yan-Zi's disconnect and makes her long for freedom. This tension has been so extreme that Yan-Zi envies the orphans with whom she used to attend school: "Qu'il serait donc merveilleux de ne pas avoir de parents, de vivre loin des obligations imposées par le lien du sang" (89). Despite her resentment of her mother's strict and overbearing control, Yan-Zi desires to please her mpther. Like Alice in Jacob's *L'Obéissance*, she tries to behave like a perfect daughter: she strives to act obedient, modest, quiet, and helpful. But her all-knowing mother understands the truth: "[Ma mère] me croyait, et ce avec raison, que j'étais au fond exaspérée par les ouvrages féminins, gourmande, sensible aux hommes et d'esprit très critique. Déçue par toutes ces bassesses, elle me trouvait pitoyable" (22). Again, as in Hébert's *Le Torrent* and in Jacob's

L'Obéissance, children are horrified to discover their mothers' omniscience that deprives them even of private thoughts. Chen exemplifies the inevitable link between Yan-Zi and her mother when Yan-Zi sees the Cesarean section scar on her mother's abdomen, it appears to her as a serpent and seems to be saying to her: "Tu ne peux pas m'échapper, c'est moi qui t'es formée, ton corps et ton esprit, avec ma chair et mon sang – tu es à moi, entièrement à moi!" (20). This mother-daughter embodiment also recalls those described in the novels by Jacob and Hébert.

Chen's novel recalls Blais's *La Belle Bête* as well; in both novels, as well as in Jacob's *L'Obéissance*, familial boundaries are crossed. The mothers are more emotionally involved with their children than with their male partners. Lori Saint-Martin argues that in both *L'Ingratitude* and *L'Obéissance* (and her statement recalls the mother-son relationship in *La Belle Bête* also), the mothers are "oblivious to the world around them: outside of that single relationship, nothing really exists in their eyes. Like jealous lovers, they long to keep their beloved to themselves" (66). However, the contrary is also true in these works. Indeed, Yan-Zi obsesses over her mother to the extent that when she is having sex for the first time (she does not want to die a virgin), she thinks constantly of her mother, particularly of her reaction when she will learn that Yan-Zi has had sex and the ensuing attention she will receive. Despite the fact that this attention will be negative, Yan-Zi still craves her mother's consideration. She is indifferent about the young man: "j'avais complètement oublié le goût de cette aventure et, en me livrant aux bras d'un inconnu, je n'avais pensé qu'à [ma mère]" (87). Similarly, Yan-Zi's mother obsesses over every aspect of her daughter's life, paying more attention to her than to her husband.

Men play a peripheral, but not insignificant, role in Chen's novel. The three male suitors of Yan-Zi interest her much less than her mother, who is connected to each of them in a different way. The first man (Yan-Zi's first boyfriend) leaves Yan-Zi because her mother does not

approve of him; the second man, Chun, is introduced to Yan-Zi by her mother who hopes they will marry; the third man, with whom Yan-Zi has sex, remains unimportant to her, as she remains concerned with her mother's anticipated reaction. Yan-Zi's preoccupation with losing her virginity and then with announcing it to her parents is an attempt to send them the message that she does not hold the same values as them; she also rejects the notion that her virginity is her greatest value: "La chose était faite. Je m'étais fait déchirer le corps. Maman avait pondu un corps qui ne valait plus rien. [. . .] Je m'étais vengée de ma mère qui m'avait mise au monde sans m'avoir dit toutes les vérités de la vie" (80). Yan-Zi's loss of virginity, although physically less remarkable for her than she had anticipated, is devastating to both of her parents. No longer a virgin, her mother bemoans Yan-Zi's fate: "Tu passeras le reste de ta vie sans mari, sans enfants, sans famille, donc sans destinée. [. . .] Ta morte est faite, ma pauvre. Tu vivras comme une morte" (88). Her mother's words recall Yan-Zi's own musings that she feels dead despite the fact that she is alive ("Je me voyais morte au milieu de la vie" (35)). Yan-Zi feels dead when she obeys her mother; after she disobeys her mother by having sex, her mother condemns her to a life that may as well be a death.

Yan-Zi's father, a former professor and great intellectual who has been forced into early retirement after a car accident, spends all of his time in his office and does not participate in family matters. He does not control or abuse his daughter; on the contrary, he is completely absent, both physically (because he is always alone in his study) and emotionally (he rarely addresses his daughter or wife). Since the accident, he is no longer able to produce great writings or teach. His time spent "working" in his office is therefore artificial but allows him to continue to disengage from his wife and daughter. The only time Chen has him speak directly to his daughter is when he reacts angrily to Yan-Zi's announcement that she is no longer a virgin,

but even then, he appears ineffectual. He attempts to throw his glass of water at her, but he misses, and his insult comes out as a stutter: "C'est une i- . . . idiote!" (85). Yan-Zi spends little time thinking about him or his reaction to her death: "Papa était intellectuel, donc imperméable. Mon suicide l'intéresserait moins que l'assassinat d'un président américain"(30). Yan-Zi's suicide is therefore intended to send a direct message solely to her mother.

Desperate to put an end to her mother's control, Yan-Zi plans her death. Suicide seems a mean both to communicate her own extreme unhappiness and to make her mother suffer. It will grant her freedom and also cause her parents, particularly her mother, embarrassment and guilt. Additionally, with her death will come the end of the family lineage (Yan-Zi is an only child). Furthermore, as every detail of her life is controlled, ending her life when and how she wishes is her one freedom: "On ne m'avait pas demandé mon avis avant de me jeter au monde. Alors j'espérais qu'au moins on me laisserait choisir le moment de mon depart" (23). Yan-Zi contemplates two significant aspects of her death throughout the entire novel: she wants to compose a perfect suicide note and she wants to die in a way that sends her mother a clear message of love and regret, in order to make her mother feel guilty. Yan-Zi first considers throwing herself out of the window, but she is too fearful that she will fail, and then she will be forced to live out the rest of her life as an invalid, even further under the control of her mother who will only take satisfaction in knowing that her daughter is completely dependent upon her. Yan-Zi finally decides to take a large quantity of sleeping pills, collecting them from various pharmacies until she has enough. The letter is a great preoccupation for Yan-Zi, who writes several drafts throughout Chen's novel. She yearns to create the right tone and content that will cause only pain to her mother. If she is too honest, she fears her mother will dismiss the letter as another indicator of her rebellious tendencies. "Je brûlais d'envie de voir maman souffrir à la

vue de mon cadavre. Souffrir jusqu'à vomir son sang. Une douleur inconsolable. [. . .] Il serait important de lui laisser une lettre très douce, disant que je l'aimais vraiment, qu'elle était mon seul vrai amour et que j'allais mourir pour elle" (18). Yan-Zi writes several drafts of her letter, but they all seem to her too phony. In order to communicate true sentiments of love and devotion, she must invent a fictional mother, and invent what she believes is an ideal mother-daughter relationship.

However, during the moments leading up to her death as well as after her death, Chen emphasizes Yan-Zi's undying desire to connect with and have a loving relationship with her mother. These conflicting feelings toward her mother recall Rich's description of what she considers inevitable physical and emotional ties between mother and daughter, even when the daughter resents her mother: "But where a mother is hated to the point of matrophobia there may also be a deep underlying pull toward her" (235).[70] After writing the last version of the suicide note, Yan-Zi is startled to realize that the sentiments of love described in her letter suddenly seem true: "Cette lettre mensongère, cette fausse déclaration d'amour à maman me semblait maintenant devenue une chose sincère" (122). Troubled by her own confusion, Yan-Zi decides to postpone her suicide and runs out of the café where she has been writing the letter. Chun, the young man Yan-Zi's mother wants her to marry, has suspected that she is suicidal, and chases her down the street. He embodies her mother – his concerned gaze reminds Yan-Zi of her mother, and he represents her mother's prioritization of marriage that she rejects. Chun tries to catch up to her, but in her desperate attempt to get away from the double image of Chun/her mother, she is run over by a truck and dies. "Imbécile!" Chun yells at her, and once again, Yan-Zi can only hear her mother's voice in his.

At the moment of her death, she experiences an epiphany: "Je comprends maintenant que notre mère est notre destin. On ne peut se détourner de sa mère sans se détourner de soi-même" (129). The feelings of love for her mother as described in her suicide note suddenly seem to her true, and her dependence upon her mother suddenly appears necessary. One of the first times out without her mother there to hold her hand, the act of which she has resented for years, she is hit by a truck. Yan-Zi wonders in this moment if other obsessive behaviors of her mother are, in fact, her own fault: "[Ma mère] aimait me donner des conseils [. . .] et je n'arrivais pas à prendre des décisions sans elle. Était-ce à cause de l'abondance de ses conseils que j'étais devenue indécise, ou mon caractère indécis lui inspirait-il sans cesse des conseils? Je ne distinguais pas la cause et l'effet" (120). Chen emphasizes these complex and at times conflicting feelings of both love and resentment of her mother throughout the entire novel. Yan-Zi's death is not the success that she had wanted. Rather, it is "une fin médiocre, sans volonté, ni émotion. Sans importance ni profondeur" (128). This unplanned death will cause her mother no guilt or grief. The outcome Yan-Zi desired, therefore, has failed, as has her suicide.

In *L'Ingratitude*, Chen argues for more communication in family relationships. Yan-Zi knows that her mother has the ability to be warm and open; she has seen her laughing with friends. However, when her mother catches her observing such situations, she quickly alters her demeanor to appear severe. Yan-Zi recalls learning that as a child, her mother was beaten with bamboo in order to learn to be obedient, and she observes the tension that endures between her mother and her grandmother. By killing herself, she ends the anger, unquestioning obedience, and lack of affection between mothers and daughters within this family. While the father is less an object of resentment for the protagonist, Chen nevertheless blames his emotional absence for

some of the difficult emotions within the family. Yan-Zi recognizes that some of her mother's anger, directed toward her, is due to this absence:

> S'il s'était soucié autant de ce qu'il y avait sur notre table à manger que de ce qui s'est passé au Vietnam ou en Yougoslavie. S'il était allé plus souvent au marché qu'au musée, s'il avait daigné se montrer un peu plus attentive à maman et à ce qu'elle faisait à la maison [. . .] maman aurait été moins dépendante de ma présence et de mon vertu. (30)

Yan-Zi recognizes that her mother might have been less strict if her father had been more involved in domestic matters and had paid more attention to his wife. This observation recalls Saint-Martin's comparison of maternal violence (directed at daughters) to a "safety valve" that prevents the direction of women's anger toward their husbands.

Although Chen's novel is situated within a Chinese locale and within a Chinese context, Chen refers to existentialist theory (Yan-Zi makes reference to Friedrich Nietzsche and she attends a performance of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mains Sales*). Chen attributes the valorization of the individual associated with existentialism to her protagonist Yan-Zi. Her rejection of submissive obedience in the name of tradition can be interpreted as a critique of women's oppression that reaches beyond the borders of China or Quebecc.

In Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma*, Flore, an interpreter, has been hired to translate the words of Emma, a woman of Haitian origin who has allegedly killed her daughter and is staying in a hospital under psychiatric evaluation until her court date. Emma speaks French, but she refuses both to speak French and to directly answer the questions of the psychiatrist who is analyzing her.[71] Her refusal to speak French is a significant gesture, as French is a language of colonizers and the language of the city to which she has immigrated (Montreal). The usage of her native language (which Agnant never specifies) reinforces Emma's

feelings of alienation in her surroundings (both the hospital and Quebecc in general). This common language also brings Emma and Flore together, despite Emma's initial disdain for Flore's presence. In "Bearing Witness and Transmitting Memory in the Works of Marie-Célie Agnant," Patrice Proulx observes that the shared language between Emma and Flore "is especially significant in terms of the transmission – and translation – of legacy in Emma's case, as Flore is not a relative or even a close friend. The two women are bound together through their ability to speak the same language of resistance" (46). Like the character of Marie in Jacob's *L'Obéissance,* Flore is introduced by Agnant as an important female character outside of the central conflict. Both Marie and Flore serve to interpret the motives of the women accused of murdering their daughters. Both women, too, serve as recipients of the confessions of the accused mothers (Florence in Jacob's novel and Emma in Agnant's novel). In *Histore de la Sexualité*, Foucault states that the act of confession is "un ritual qui se déploie dans un rapport de pouvoir, car on n'avoue pas sans la présence au moins virtuelle d'un partenaire qui n'est pas simplement l'interlocuteur, mais l'instance qui requiert l'aveu, l'impose, l'apprécie et intervient pour juger, punir, pardonner, consoler, réconcilier" (82-3). Due to the nature of confessions, neither Marie nor Flore are able to remain impartial (as their professions require). In Jacob's novel, Marie feels conflicted because she empathizes with Florence despite her opinion that Florence should serve as an example in the hopes of preventing other cases of child abuse. In Agnant's text, Flore identifies with Emma to the extent that she decides to hide any words that might indicate Emma's culpability: "Je ne suis plus une simple interprète. Petit à petit, j'abandonne mon rôle, je deviens une partie d'Emma, j'épouse le destin d'Emma" (18).

From their very first meeting, Flore is shaken by Emma's words, which are incoherent to the doctor, but which carry strong meaning for Flore. Doctor MacLeod is bemused by Emma's

constant referral to the color blue, but Flore immediately understands Emma's fixation on the color blue, which refers to the sea, the sky, the blue tones in her dark skin, madness, and the blood of drowned slaves. Emma refuses to speak concretely of the alleged murder of her child, Lola, which took place soon after her doctoral thesis was rejected for the second time. Rather, she speaks of her mother and other female ancestors, linking their stories to Haiti's past. In an interview, Agnant explains that this novel was an attempt to connect the present and the past to see how history, specifically the history of slavery in Haiti, could affect someone in the present: "C'est ce que j'ai voulu faire dans *Le Livre d'Emma*: comprendre le présent d'Emma à partir de son passé" (Jurney 388). Emma is preoccupied with sharing the collective memory of slavery and suffering that authoritative figures have denied and ignored. The problem is that no one has listened to her.

Flore comes to understand Emma, although no one else has the ability to comprehend her. Emma's lover, Nickolas, is too self-absorbed to understand Emma, despite his love for her. The social worker assigned to Emma's case has stopped her attempts at comprehending Emma. The newspapers summarize and dismiss the death of Lola with racist stereotypes: "Un certain journaliste, qui ne connaît ni l'histoire ni l'emplacement géographique de l'île d'où vient Emma, a décrit le patelin où elle a vu le jour, un lieu nommé Grand-Lagon, dans les Caraïbes. [. . .] Pour illustrer la photo, une légende, ou plutôt un cliché: 'Une Noire sacrifie son enfant . . . Une affaire de vaudou?' Ils ont tous expliqué Emma" (15-6). This caption reduces Emma to her race, and a religious stereotype is used to explain the case to people who might not have any real knowledge of Haiti. Emma's refusal to speak French, the language of colonizers, is indicative of her disdain for white, Québécois authority figures, as is her nickname for Doctor MacLeod ("le petit docteur"). She also nicknames Flore "Poupette," which transforms from a term of derogation to

one of endearment as the two women continue to meet, and as Emma becomes more verbose, understanding that Flore truly hears her words and their meaning. Flore observes that both the doctor and Emma speak to each other in condescending tones, but for the doctor, a white man in a position of privilege, this dynamic is natural: "Pour le docteur MacLeod, [Emma] est comme le bois de la table, comme le lit, un pur objet" (31). Even with Flore's translations, the doctor cannot, or perhaps refuses to, understand his patient.

Emma determines to let her voice be heard, and she wants to speak for women who have been silenced before her. In fact, all of the black women in the same psychiatric hospital attempt to do this. Their "folie" is linked to their refusal to keep silent: "Nous sommes plusieurs vraies négresses dans cette aile. Nous nous saluons ainsi de temps à autre. Nous hurlons pour toutes celles à qui on refuse le droit de se faire entendre" (62-3). However, Emma recognizes that she will never be heard or understood because black women have been silenced and reduced to the color of their skin. However, Emma's words affect Flore, who is so troubled by Emma's stories that she considers quitting her job. She quickly realizes that her profession as interpreter has become complicated because she cannot simply translate the words of Emma. When she does, they hold no meaning for white authoritarian figures such as Doctor MacLeod: "Avec Emma, je traduis non pas des mots, mais des vies. La sienne d'abord" (16).

Emma resents the doctor's presence, as she bitterly (and correctly) suspects that he will be writing a book about her: "Quand tu auras tout noté, tu écriras un livre, c'est ça? Et personne n'aura le droit de douter de tes sources" (32). Doctor MacLeod will explain to his unquestioning white readers "la folie" of Emma as a representative of her race and sex. Yet Emma's thesis was twice rejected despite her years of research. In this novel, Agnant creates a multi-textual narrative, a *mise en abyme* in which there are stories embedded within a story. The title *Le Livre*

d'Emma refers to Agnant's novel, Emma's thesis, and Emma's oral storytelling. The importance of oral storytelling in this novel underscores the tradition of orality in some Caribbean traditions. The stories Emma tells about her childhood, her mother and her ancestors all serve to provide personal and collective memories. Agnant makes it clear that the denial of history and the silencing of people, particularly that of black women, is evidence of widespread racism and sexism. In an interview, Agnant explains that, "[les femmes esclaves] se retrouvaient au dernier échelon, subissant racisme et sexisme de tout bord, viol et violence de tout bord. Au fait, le fascisme, la discrimination, le sexisme, l'exclusion, sont des maux qui perdurent à différents degrés dans toutes les sociétés" (388). This racism is so pervasive that it has infected countries where black people are the majority. For example, Flore recalls another job at the psychiatric hospital where she had to translate for a Dominican woman who crushed the TV screen in the waiting room, screaming that she was tired of feeling invisible. Running nude down the hall, this woman cried, "Mes trois sœurs avaient la peau claire [. . .] comme l'eau de source. Moi, j'étais la seule *négrita*, l'unique, l'honte de ma mère" (49 emphasis in original). Similarly, Emma describes her own dark skin as being one resentful factor in her own complicated relationship with her mother.

Like Yan-Zi in Chen's *L'Ingratitude,* Emma describes herself as a child who desperately and futilely longed for the love of her own mother, Fifie, from the moment she was born: "Je sais déjà que Fifie me voue une haine incommensurable. Je te le jure, Poupette, je l'ai senti sitôt que j'ai mis le nez dehors [. . .] J'apprends donc, dès les premiers jours, à développer des réflexes de survie – puisque moi, j'aime Fifie de tout mon être" (55). One of quintuplets, all girls, Emma is the only sister born alive. Agnant depicts Emma as an infant who is determined to survive against all odds. Emma's cries are described as powerful enough to drown out the winds of the

cyclones hitting Haiti. Emma's aunt Grazie, who refers to Emma as a demon, observes Emma's desire to speak for others who cannot speak, even as a baby: "'Celle-là, disait-elle, en faisant référence à moi bien entendu, criait pour toutes les autres dont on n'a jamais entendu la voix" (54). Grazie is referring to Emma's four sisters, but her words predict Emma's future determination to give voice to those who have not had one. Emma's loud cries frighten Fifie, and Emma's surprising survival at birth scares both her mother and her classmates due to cultural beliefs. Emma grows up isolated with only her dog, whom she considers a surrogate father, for friendship. Despite Fifie's complete lack of affection for her daughter, Emma is obsessed with simply feeling the touch of her mother's skin; in her eyes, Fifie is beautiful and perfect.

Emma, however, is considered by others, and believes herself to be, ugly. This ugliness is due in part to the dark hue of her skin:

> Ma tête est énorme, couverte de grains de poivre épars, et ma peau, si noire, brille parfois et se voit presque bleue. Je te l'ai dit, c'est à cause de cela qu'ils me détestent. [. . .] C'est vrai que mes cheveux sont très rudes, ma peau, couleur de charbon, mais je ne vois point le rapport avec tous ces mots alignés dans le dictionnaire sous le mot noir: funeste, funèbre, atroce, odieux, marqué par le mal, méchant (76).

In order to make Emma more beautiful so that she will be able to get married, Fifie takes her, at 11 years old, to a sorceress named Azwélia: "Fifie m'avait laissée chez [Azwélia] pour qu'avec sa magie, ses bains de chance, elle me transforme en une femme à laquelle aucun homme ne saurait résister, malgré ma peau de nuit" (92). However, Emma describes these three days as so torturous (Agnant alludes to genital excision) that she abandons all desire for maternal love and makes the decision to never forgive her mother for this betrayal.

Emma runs away to live with a cousin of her grandmother, Mattie, who instills in Emma the value of memory. Mattie prompts Emma's interest in her own heritage. It is Emma's ancestor Kilima, whose story is told by Mattie to Emma, who then retells it to Flore, who is taken away by ship to become a slave. Her name is taken away from her and she is branded by her owner. When Kilima's owner comes to get her, another woman, Cécile, attempts to protect her but has her hands and feet cut off as punishment by two men. To avenge Cécile, Kilima sets the plantation on fire and escapes. Kilima eventually gives birth to a daughter, also named Emma. She attempts to kill her daughter and then kills herself by drowning in the ocean. Even before learning of Kilima's story, Emma becomes aware of the fact that parents reject their own children, not only emotionally as her own mother does, but physically as well. When she discovers the bones of an infant buried in the ground, she wonders if the baby was killed and buried because of his or her dark skin ("la peau trop bleue" (83)). Emma realizes that her own mother must have tried to abort her sisters and her. The first time she addresses Flore (who is light-skinned) directly, it is to ask her, whether she knows that Flore may have a dark-skinned baby someday: "Tu sais que tu peux mettre au monde un enfant noir comme la nuit? Tu le sais, hein, Poupette?" (85). Emma's lover, Nickolas, confesses to Flore that Emma had tried to abort Lola, unsuccessfully. Emma explains to the doctor that black women were valuable during the time of slavery; female slaves provided physical labor, the reproduction of other slaves, and sexual relief for men, black and white. "Mais aujourd'hui, le bois de cette table a plus de valeur que dix négresses, n'est-ce pas la vérité, petit docteur? Elles ne suscitent aucun intérêt, les négresses. C'est pour cela qu'elles sont mieux mortes. C'est pour cela que beaucoup d'entre ells naissent déjà mortes, viola!" (25-6). In a world where black women have only been valued as slaves, it is preferable not to be born in the first place. Emma links slavery to her present

condition; just as slaves were given names by their masters, in the hospital her identity is removed; nurses refer to her as "la nouère du 122" (23). Although Emma never confesses directly to having murdered her own daughter, she says that Lola needed to die, as she was already condemned, having been born a black female: "Pour cela, Lola devait mourir. Quelle importance, maintenant ou après, quelle importance! Comme moi, Lola était condamnée" (162).

Like her ancestor Kilima, Emma drowns herself, after having escaped from the hospital. In dying, Emma joins her relatives and other black slaves who had drowned in the ocean years before. This act comes after Doctor MacLeod has announced that no trial will take place. Emma, who had been preparing her defense, has therefore once again been silenced. Her death marks the end of her futile attempts at sharing her heritage and history, for no one has listened to her words except for Flore.[72]

The dark themes of death, suicide and murder that pervade these three novels are juxtaposed with the longing for maternal love and affection. Despite the variations between the families depicted in these novels, such as cultural differences, class differences, and age differences at the time of the daughters' deaths (Lola is an infant, Alice is eight years old and Yan-Zi is twenty-five), the unrealized potential for maternal love and strong mother-daughter rapports remains consistent. The daughters in each text are desperate to gain their mothers' affection, but each mother is prevented from fulfilling this need due to her own upbringing and social mores that prohibit women's liberty of expression. All three mothers were physically abused and/or otherwise rejected by their own mothers, which also hinders them from knowing how to create better relationships with their daughters. In *L'Obéissance*, Florence is abused and ridiculed by her mother and objectified and humiliated by her husband. She takes out her frustrations on her daughter Alice, who trains herself to be perfectly obedient out of love for her

mother, whom she desperately wants to please. In *L'Ingratitude*, Yan-Zi's mother, whose own mother had physically abused her as a child, controls her daughter because of society's rigid expectations of women and also due to her frustrations with her absent husband. In *Le Livre d'Emma*, Emma is rejected and betrayed by Fifie, whose internalized racism and fear of her daughter prohibit any sort of loving relationship. Emma's realization that black women remain powerless and unheard, leads her to confront the bleak reality of her daughter Lola's existence. Emma's understanding that her daughter's life is already condemned recalls Isabelle-Marie's contemplations regarding her own daughter, Anne, in *La Belle Bête*; because of their daughters' appearances (Lola's dark skin and Anne's ugliness), they are better off dead. The mothers in these three novels are unable to break the pattern of abuse that marked their own childhoods.

Jacob, Chen, and Agnant all present mothers who do not cause the deaths of their daughters out of hatred (unlike the matricides committed in *La Belle Bête* and *Le Torrent*). On the contrary, they see their daughters as reflections and continuations of themselves. Frank confessions of mixed feelings regarding having children and references to abortions in each of these three texts portray an honest ambivalence about motherhood that remains taboo. These texts recall Adrienne Rich's sympathetic imagining of the emotions experienced by a woman who committed infanticide:

> She loved, she tried to love, she screamed and was not heard, because there was nothing and no one in her surroundings who saw her plight as unnatural, as anything but the 'homemaker's' usual service from the home. She became a scapegoat, the one around whom the darkness of maternity is allowed to swirl – the invisible violence of the institution of motherhood, the guilt, the powerless responsibility for human lives, the

judgments and condemnations, the fear of her own power, the guilt, the guilt, the guilt. (277)

Jacob, Chen and Agnant each depict this "darkness of maternity," through their literay mothers' frustrated limitations. The mothers' rage, although it stems from other relationships and other restrictions, is directed at their daughters, because they have no other outlets. In their novels, each author suggests that women's roles remain strictly defined and that these limitations hinder their potential as individuals but also their potential to develop strong, loving relationships with their daughters.

Chapter 6

Welcome to My Nightmare: Transgenerational and Transnational Family Secrets in *Le Ciel de Bay City* by Catherine Mavrikakis

"Welcome to my nightmare, I think you're gonna like it, I think you're gonna feel like you belong, a nocturnal vacation, unnecessary sedation,you want to feel at home 'cause you belong" Alice Cooper, "Welcome to My Nightmare" (1975)

In *Le Ciel de Bay City* (2008), Catherine Mavrikakis explores the connection between family history and family relationships. In this novel, Mavrikakis focuses primarily on the tensions within a family that denies its religious and cultural history. Of equal importance, however, is the relationship between the adolescent, female protagonist, Amy, and her mother. In a semi-autobiographical work (Mavrikakis refers to this text as "un essai-fiction") entitled *Ventriloquies*, Mavrikakis calls for more openness regarding women's experiences, including reproductive experiences and relationships in general. As in her fictional work, Mavrikakis (and her co-author Martine Delvaux) stress the importance of mother-daughter relationships while each bemoaning the strained rapports between themselves and their own mothers. The alienation felt by Amy in Mavrikakis's novel as well as that expressed in *Ventriloquies* is experienced at two levels: an outsider status within the home and family as well as an outsider status within an entire country. Mavrikakis suggests that memories, whether those resulting from unhappy childhoods or collective memories of an entire ethnic group, reside inevitably within us.

Like her protagonist Amy, Mavrikakis grew up as somewhat of a cultural outsider; she was born in Chicago to her French mother and Greek father (who was raised in Algeria).

According to her website, Mavrikakis moved to and from France, Canada and the United States, where she attended a French school (Mavrikakis refers to the school on her blog as "un lycée français 'à l'étranger,'" ironically emphasizing her foreigner status at school.[73] *Le Ciel de Bay City* takes place during the 1970s, which is when Mavrikakis, too, experienced her adolescence in Quebec. Amy lives with her family in Michigan, yet she is hyperaware of her European (French/Jewish) heritage, of which no one speaks. Amy's family background becomes an obsession, and she sees visions of her grandparents' ghosts residing in the basement at home and suffers nightmares about her relatives who died in at Auschwitz during the Holocaust. Parallel to those nightmares are other nighttime terrors in which her deceased older sister, Angie, appears to speak with Amy. An outsider within her family, her town of Bay City, and even within the whole of the United States, Amy's alienation eventually drives her to desperate actions – setting fire to the house and killing her family – but she later strives for redemption as she becomes a mother herself.

Mavrikakis uses almost no direct discourse in her novel, which heightens the feelings of isolation experienced by Amy. The narration consists almost entirely of Amy's thought process. The narration of *Le Ciel de Bay City* illustrates how life is non-linear, but rather an oscillation between the past and present. Entitled "Les années soixante et soixante-dix," Mavrikakis's first chapter is Amy's summary of her childhood. The rest of the novel jumps back and forth between Amy's adulthood and her adolescence. Mavrikakis explains her belief that the notion of chronological time is unstable: "J'ai l'impression que la vie est anachronique, que ce qu'on vit au présent aura des répercussions sur l'avenir. [. . .] Qu'on est toujours un peu gros de notre passé et qu'on en accouche tout le temps, de différentes façons" (cited in Catherine Lalonde). The idea that the past is invariably with us in the present remains key throughout Mavrikakis's novel.

Mavrikakis scatters popular culture references (the names of hit songs of the time, for example) throughout the novel, which helps to situate the shifting historical context. Four sections of this novel are marked with dates indicating the four days leading up to the climactic events of July 4, 1979, but they are interspersed with details of Amy's adulthood, which focuses particularly on her experiences as a mother.

In this novel, Amy Duchesnay, lives with her mother, aunt, uncle and cousin in Bay City, Michigan during the 1970s. Amy describes Bay City (a real city in Michigan) as a factory-filled location with only the K-Mart (where she is employed as a cashier) as a place of interest. As she and her family are so cloistered due to their unwavering routines, Amy is unaware if there is, in fact, even a bay in Bay City.[74] Her mother, Denise, and her aunt, Babette, have come to Michigan by way of France, and they appear happy to embrace the local habits of constantly blasting the air conditioning units, preparing North American meals such as hot dogs and Jello dishes, and supporting American consumerism by shopping frequently. Amy is unloved by her mother who constantly compares her to Angie, Amy's older sister who was a stillborn baby. Because Angie died at birth, she never had the opportunity to disappoint their mother. As a result, Amy can never live up to her sister's flawless legacy.

Mavrikakis contrasts the two mother-child relationships within Amy's home. Whereas Denise resents Amy, Babette adores her son, Victor. Furthermore, Babette spoils and dotes upon Victor, cooking for and cleaning up after him, even as he becomes a young adult. She believes Victor to be very clever, but Amy observes that he struggles with all but the most basic French phrases and fails his classes at school. The dynamic between Babette and Victor recalls that between Louise and Patrice in Blais's *La Belle Bête*. Both mothers are more emotionally invested in their sons than their male partners, and their love for their sons becomes almost

sexual. While Louise admires Patrice's physique and begs him not to leave her for a wife, Babette buys Victor condoms and *Playboy* magazines. Although Babette and Amy eventually develop a closer relationship due to their secret obsessions with their family lineage, Amy's relationship with Denise also recalls that between Isabelle-Marie and Louise in *La Belle Bête*; just as Louise ignores her daughter Isabele-Marie, Denise ignores or insults Amy and leaves her to fend for herself. Amy works up to sixty hours a week at K-Mart, on top of attending high school where she excels, whereas Victor has never been expected to find a job. She prepares her own meals and is expected to contribute to the maintenance of the household duties. Mavrikakis presents two different, but equally flawed mother-child relationships. Victor is lazy, entitled and spoiled due to his mother's adoration that results in low expectations for him, while Amy is independent but unhappy. While her mother's lack of attention or care bothers Amy, she feels equally upset by her nighttime visions of her dead family members. Amy finds some relief from these familial tensions and nightmares through the music of Alice Cooper and sexual encounters with boys from her high school.

Amy experiences nighttime visions both of her dead sister Angie and of Holocaust victims. Amy learns that her family has Jewish roots, but her mother and aunt refuse to speak of their European and religious past. Eventually, Babette confides to Amy that forty-eight of their family members died in a concentration camp during the Holocaust. She and Amy share the same vision of Amy's grandparents (George Rosenberg and Elsa Rosenbweig), included among those forty-eight relatives dead in the gas chambers of Auschwitz, as ghosts in the basement. (Mavrikakis describes them as "fantômes" (172) and "spectres" (183)). While Babette believes Amy's grandparents can be saved and fully die in peace by converting to Catholicism, as she has done herself, Amy wants to embrace her Jewish heritage and confront the past. In order to

accomplish this, Amy's deceased grandfather tells her that she needs to set the house on fire to end the suffering both of her grandparents and of Amy herself. On July 4th, the day of independence both for Amy (it is her 18th birthday) and the United States, Amy does set fire to the house, killing her entire family. Despite her years of longing for death, Amy mysteriously survives the fire and spends her adulthood trying to make peace with her past.

Years after the fire, Amy gives birth to a daughter, Heaven. Amy believes that her daughter will be free from their family's traumatic past, due to Amy's love for and honesty with Heaven that contrasts with the relationship she experienced with her own mother. However, at the novel's end, Amy has one last vision: that of her entire deceased family (those who died during the Holocaust as well as her immediate family members who died in the fire in Bay City) surrounding Heaven's bedside. Amy understands that her family's history continues to live within her daughter, despite her efforts to reconcile with the past. Whereas Denise has kept all information about their family's history from Amy, Amy confides everything related to the family's past to her own daughter Heaven. Amy's decision to reveal everything to Heaven, including her own crime, is an intentional effort to prevent the same distress that she experienced herself as a child. Amy tells Heaven about the fire, and they visit the Bay City tombstone; the two of them also visit Auschwitz together. As Lucie Lequin notes, "Contrairement à sa mère, Heaven n'est pas haineuse; elle connaît la généologie familiale, l'ignoble crime maternel, mais ne semble pas en souffrir" ("L'Écriture du soi" 246). Although Heaven appears untroubled by her mother's crime and the family history, Amy's attempts to protect Heaven from the same transgenerational traumas fail.

Amy's inability to prevent her daughter from experiencing the same troubling nightmares and obsessions illustrates the notion of the constant presence of the past as described by

Mavrikakis: “Je trouve que l’on vit tout le temps dans un perpétuel cimetière. [. . .] on vit avec un certains poids du passé, même si on n’y croit pas, même si on ne porte que des couleurs vives” (2). The supernatural elements of this novel also demonstrate that the past is always present within us and where we live. Amy’s grandparents, Georges Rosenberg and Elsa Rozenweig, died during the Holocaust,yet both Babette and Amy are able to see them, living in a filthy storage room in the basement. Amy’s boyfriend, David, is later also able to see them, which suggests that it is not merely the “folie” (that Amy attributes both to herself and to Babette) that causes this vision but perhaps unique to those with Jewish roots (David is half Jewish). Additionally, Mavrikakis describes Amy’s nightmares as accurate representations of the mass killings that took place at Auschwitz, years before Amy was even born, and the specific faces she observes among the victims she envisions are those of her relatives, whose photographs she has never seen. A psychiatrist that Amy sees briefly believes that Amy’s nightmares are due to generational traumas, inherited from her mother, while Babette believes that God has granted Amy a visionary gift. As much as she may try, Amy as an adult cannot avoid the memories of her childhood nor her family’s recollections of the Holocaust; they do not die in the fire as she hopes. Rather, they linger within her, even as she travels far from Bay City.

In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, the awareness of the past, particularly of the family’s Jewish heritage and deaths during the Holocaust, manifests itself differently in the various family members. Denise and Babette do not discuss their European background, even hiding their preferences for French food, for example, and they mock the accents of other recent immigrants to Michigan (even those who have also come from France and Quebecc). They speak French at home, although for years Amy is under the impression that this language is unique to her family. She is astonished when she hears other French speakers for the first time: “Cette rencontre est

pour moi une révélation. Le français existe ailleurs que dans ma famille. Ma mère et sa sœur n'ont pas inventé cette langue pour me rendre folle" (32). This discovery is significant as it illustrates to what extent the silence regarding their family background exists at home while additionally increasing Amy's curiosity about her lineage. Once Babette reveals the history of their family to Amy, as well as her own secret obsession with her deceased relatives, Amy is better able to understand the meaning behind her nightmares, although the nightmares themselves do not cease.

Due to her preoccupation with her family's lineage and her drive to share the collective memory of her family's past, Mavrikakis's protagonist Amy recalls Emma in Marie-Célie Agnant's novel, *Le Livre d'Emma*. Both Mavrikakis and Agnant depict these women as representatives of traumatic historical genocides who express both the desire and the burden of needing to share these memories. Additionally, both Mavrikakis and Agnant stress the significant experience of being an outsider, both within the family unit and as an immigrant. Both Amy and Emma are born in precarious health. Emma is the only surviving daughter among five baby girls. In Mavrikakis's novel, Amy is born premature and is obliged to remain for neonatal care at a hospital in Chicago due to medical complications (notably respiratory difficulties that are exacerbated by the pollution of Bay City and nearby Detroit and that add to Amy's constant feelings of suffocation). During Amy's stay in the hospital, Denise does not visit or even come to get her when Amy is ready to leave; rather, it is her uncle Gustavo (Babette's husband) who brings the infant home. Denise constantly tells Amy that she is stupid and that she should never have been born:

> Ma mère me répète toute mon enfance que je suis demeurée, que, de ma naissance, je ne me suis jamais remise: il suffit de me voir. Elle pleure souvent dans les bras de sa sœur

> Babette en me regardant vivre et en répétant qu'elle aurait préféré avoir une fille morte, enterrée, comme sa première fille, Angie, décedée à sa naissance (13-14)

Amy recognizes that she can never live up to her mother's beliefs of what her "angelic" sister Angie would have fulfilled if she had lived. Similarly, in Agnant's novel, Emma's mother resents Emma's existence and informs her (verbally through Emma's aunt and nonverbally through her own silence) that she should have died along with her sisters. Amy and Emma acknowledge that despite childhood physical weaknesses, they are meant, or rather doomed, to experience life: "Je suis condamnée à la vie" (16) notes Amy, after surviving a childhood operation during which she nearly dies. Likewise, Emmy explains her survival at birth as evidence that she was destined to live: "j'étais là pour rester, bien décidée à tout savoir et à faire le voyage jusqu'au bout" (54). Both Amy and Emma are deprived of maternal love; their mothers withhold affection and behave cruelly toward their daughters. The fathers of both Amy and Emma are absent, and the girls are raised by their (quietly resentful) mothers and their (more vocal) aunts. As a child, Emma longs for nothing more than affection from her mother, although she eventually abandons all notions of possible maternal love. Mavrikakis presents Amy as a girl who, like Emma, has learned not to expect any love or even kindness from her mother.

Despite, or perhaps because of a dearth of expected emotional care from their parents, the protagonists of Agnant and Mavrikakis's novels become obsessed with the genealogical histories of their families. Both Emma and Amy become close to relatives who teach them about their respective lineages. For Emma, it is her grandmother who not only shows her love but also shares with her the family history that drives Emma to immerse herself in her doctoral thesis. For Amy, it is her aunt Babette who eventually shares with Amy the secrets of their family's past, including that concerning forty-eight relatives who died in a concentration camp during the

Holocaust. Babette and Amy alone are aware of the presence of Amy's grandparents (killed in the gas chambers at Auschwitz) in a state of existence in the basement. Both Mavrikakis and Agnant illustrate the idea that the past is always within us in their novels. In *Le Livre d'Emma*, Agnant's narrator explains: "Tout ce passé n'a de passé que le nom [. . .] Il s'obtine à demeurer toujours là, nous guettant derrière l'écran de l'oubli" (158). Both Emma and Amy are marked by linguistic differences as well; Amy speaks French with her family at home and English everywhere else but does not learn that French is spoken beyond her household in Bay City until she meets some French customers in K-Mart one day. The discovery of French as an international language motivates Amy to find out as much as she can about her roots beyond Bay City. Emma refuses to speak French, the language of colonizers, insisting on speaking her native tongue (never specified by Agnant). Besides his ignorance of the significance of Emma's choice of language, Emma's psychiatrist, Dr. MacLeod, is unable or unwilling to hear and attempt to understand the importance of Emma's past and the history of the Haitian people.

Despite the "expert" doctor's lack of comprehension, Emma and her interpreter Flore understand that within Emma exists the lives of Haitian slaves of the past. As explained by Scott Lyngaas, "Emma lives slavery as a trans-generational trauma and incarnates the horrors of slavery nearly 200 years after the independence of Haiti" (968).[75] In Mavrikakis's novel, Amy's psychiatrist also uses Lyngaas's term "traumatisme transgénérationnel" (119) to describe the cause of Amy's nightmares. It is Amy's mother, however, who refuses to meet and work with the psychiatrist (claiming it is too far for her to travel to the appointments in Detroit) and so, Amy's foray into psychiatric healing is abruptly halted. Both Emma and Amy are intrigued with their ancestors in part because of the silence surrounding them; Emma is outraged by falsified, patriarchal "History" that fails to acknowledge or understand the authentic history of slavery.

Authoritative figures, such as Dr. MacLeod, seek to explain the "folie" of herself and other black women while ignoring historical truths that continue to affect people presently.[76] In Mavrikakis's novel, Amy is frustrated with the silence of her mother who will not acknowledge their Jewish heritage and their relatives who died during the Holocaust. Away from her native France, Denise is able to live in a state of denial in the United States, "ce pays illusoire où il est possible de croire en demain, malgré l'ignominie des temps" (243).

Both women feel alienated from their communities. Emma's anger against European and Canadian "authority" figures who disregard her knowledge and experience, is expressed, in part, by her refusal to speak French. By expressing herself in her native tongue, Emma is defying the community that has, in turn, rejected her. Amy feels excluded and unloved in her home, and she considers herself different from her high school peers. She marks herself as different by dressing unconventionally (she prefers to wear black and wears a lot of heavy black eyeliner, in the style of her idol Alice Cooper.Alienated from (and disdainful of) her family and peers, Amy longs for death. Emma and Amy embody the memories of the institutionalized violence and discrimination of slavery and the Holocaust.[77] For both women, too, this embodiment leads to tragedy and violence for themselves and their families. These tragedies are not understood or heard by others. Amy sets her family's home ablaze, killing everyone inside, yet authoritative figures (the police) claim she is innocent, unable to imagine Amy's motives for committing arson, despite her confession. After Emma fails twice to defend her dissertation, she drowns her infant daughter, but the hospital psychiatrist is unable to make the connection between these events. After Dr. MacLeod determines that there will be no trial, and thusly Emma's defense will not be heard, Emma, once again silenced, drowns herself.

At her death, Emma joins her daughter and multitudes of other black women drowned in

the blue seas. In *Le Livre d'Emma*, Agnant privileges the color blue from the beginning of the novel. From the tone of Emma's skin, to the sky, to the water, the omnipresent and ominous color blue indicates foremost the seas in which thousands of slaves died. In *Le Ciel de Bay City,* Mavrikakis constantly evokes the color mauve. It usually refers to the color of the sky, a culmination of the pollution and oppression of Bay City that recalls images of the gas chambers of concentration camps.

Both Mavrikakis and Agnant offer a pessimistic view of North American culture that alienates its citizens who cannot or refuse to forget or dismiss their heritage. Mavrikakis and Agnant also suggest the importance of the potential for close mother-daughter relationships. Additionally, Mavrikakis and Agnant suggest that their protagonists's preoccupations with the horrors of their families' pasts hinder their abilities to form close relationships with others; both Emma and Amy resist becoming close to their male partners. Amy's sexual relations with the boys from school are emotionless dalliances for her. When she and David become a couple, Amy tells herself that they have different futures and that their relationship is temporary, despite her fondness for David who, in turn, is devoted to her. As an adult, Amy disconnects from Heaven's father (and is even uncertain whom among her many lovers is Heaven's biological father) and devotes herself to a life of celibacy after becoming inspired by ascetic women she meets during a trip to India. Emma and Amy both seek fulfillment either in academic pursuits (Emma's dissertation) or in career (Amy's obsession with the sky eventually leads her to become a pilot). Each woman gives birth to a daughter and experience great feelings of love for them that contrast their relationships with their own mothers. Amy names her daughter Heaven, who serves as a savior for Amy. However, Amy experiences guilt as well as joy at the birth of her daughter: "Une culpabilité aussi. Celle d'avoir mis quelqu'un dans ce monde, sous ces horribles

cieux qui, qu'on le veuille ou non, seront ceux de notre mort" (48). Emma drowns her own daughter, realizing that black women are doomed from the start of life, and she then drowns herself, immersing herself in the waters where her ancestors, too, had perished.

In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Mavrikakis creates a constant background of death from the start of the novel. Amy is particularly affected by the various *faits divers* involving death in the Bay City community: a neighbor kills her four year old daughter; the daughter of some other neighbors has died of cancer at a young age; a school teacher is hit by drunk drivers and perishes, "décapitée dans sa voiture" (17). Amy, too, is struck by the deaths of the family pets, one after another, and she is aware of the poor quality of their lives (one dog chokes to death on the very chain that keeps her perpetually tied up in the backyard). As an adult, Amy befriends an elderly man, Bernie, whose death is the first "vraie agonie" she has experienced (162). Amy observes that despite the deaths that she carries within her (the Holocaust victims, her sister Angie, her family dead in the fire in Bay City) Bernie's death is even more painful because the others were more abstract than concrete: "Je n'avais jamais pu observer la vie quitter la vie et le corps se métamorphoser pour accueillir en lui l'œuvre parfois bien lente de la mort" (160). Amy's mother Denise often remarks that it would have been better for Amy to not have been born, and these comments have impacted Amy: "Je devrais ne jamais être née mais je suis là et il n'est pas aisé d'effacer toute trace de soi. J'aurai été. C'est bien là mon malheur. [. . .] [Ma mère] ne pourra oublier ma naissance et puis l'obstination dérisoire de mon corps à vivre" (35). Denise obliges Amy to accompany her weekly to her sister Angie's tomb.

Angie also appears in Amy's dreams, along with visions of Holocaust victims, among whom Amy finds herself, crushed under multitudes of bodies: "La nuit, ma sœur, embryon décomposé, m'apparaît. [. . .] Elle est à chaque fois de plus en plus ravagée par la mort et la

putréfaction. La nuit, je suis poussée dans une chambre à gaz alors que des milliers de gens hurlent en se crevant les yeux" (28). Amy's aunt Babette finds Amy's descriptions of her visions uncanny; she is struck by Amy's accurate depictions of the gas chambers at Auschwitz and of their specific family members who died there (Amy has never seen any of their photos). Babette believes that Amy is having saint-like visions. Having converted to Catholicism, Babette believes that Amy's nighttime visions are signs of God's grace. Babette even marries a former priest, Gustavo, who is from Brazil, and who is the only family member to be affectionate toward Amy (Mavrikakis depicts him, too, as an outsider in this family. Amy learns that "nous sommes bel et bien Juifs" (30) when she picks up the phone and overhears a man accusing Babette of having ruined Gustavo's priesthood, calling her "cette sale Juive" (30). Babette believes that the souls of their relatives, including those of her parents living in the basement, can be saved through Catholicism. On the other hand, when Amy questions Denise about their Jewish heritage, Denise refuses to discuss the topic. Both Babette and Denise reject Judaism, choosing respectively Catholicism and atheism, claiming these choices are a means to forget about the horrors of the World War Two era. Their last name, Duchesnay, given to them after they were adopted in Poland, further removes them from their Jewish identity. Babette justifies the deaths of their relatives during the Holocaust as a means to eventually save herself, by leading her away Judiasm. She keeps a Bible in Amy's bedroom, along with a crucifix that scares Amy. Inspired by her own marriage to a former priest, Babette introduces Amy to a young man considering the priesthood. This, to Babette, is a solution to keep Amy home instead of going away to study at a university. Additionally, she believes that by marrying a Catholic man, Amy will be saved as she herself has been saved. Amy observes, however, that Gustavo is as unhappy as herself, and that he and Babette have a flawed marriage. While Denise is also not

enthusiastic about the prospect of Amy going away to college, her reluctance stems from her belief that Amy is stupid and will not succeed. Having rejected both Judaism and Catholicism, Denise does not find anything useful in any religion. According to Amy, "Ma mère déteste encore plus la religion que moi et elle ne veut pas que j'épouse un curé" (78). Despite the religious persuasions of her mother and her aunt, Amy identifies as Jewish: "Je suis Juive, une fausse Juive dont on cache encore l'identité, une Juive amputée d'elle-même et qui porte une prothèse de catholicisme" (23).

By pretending to be interested in Catholicism, Amy succeeds in gaining Babette's trust, so that Babette eventually confides into her their family's past. To Amy's astonishment, Babette is as obsessed with their family's lineage as Amy, keeping photo albums and a homemade family tree secretly hidden in her bedroom: "Dans une boîte de carton beige qu'elle extirpe de sa cachette, ma tante conserve pêle-mêle ce qu'elle a pu récupérer de sa vie et de celle de sa famille avant 1943" (141). Babette reveals that she was able to learn everything she could about their family's experiences during the Holocaust, including details of her parents' time at Auschwitz through meetings with a cousin that she had to keep secret from Denise:

> Je suis comme toi. Quelqu'un qui veut savoir . . . Eh bien, voilà nous savons. Ta mère me disait d'arrêter de fouiller le passé de ne rien déterrer du temps. Mais on ne peut déterrer les cendres qui volitent encore dans le ciel polonais. [. . .] Du corps de mes parents des mes oncles, de mes tantes, nous continuons à respirer les restes, poussés par les grands vents. (84)

Mavrikakis uses a rare example of direct discourse to stress the importance of Babette's words that express the strong feelings of Amy regarding the presence of the dead within themselves and within the winds – or skies – surrounding them. Babette evokes the sky in Poland that remains

tainted with the memories of the Holocaust; for Amy, these memories linger, too, in the sky of Bay City. During this experience of sharing secret obsessions, Amy discovers that Babette understands Amy's desire to learn about their family. Babette reveals details of her childhood with Denise, including their adoption into a Catholic family in Normandy, their business ventures in Paris, and their eventual move to the United States. Finally, they visit the ghosts of Amy's grandparents in the basement. Babette has known about their presence long before Amy discovers them, which suggests perhaps that they came to Bay City along with their daughters: "Mes parents sont revenus [. . .] abîmés, écrasés par leur séjour à Auschwitz et puis par leur errance dans la mort. [. . .] Après Auschwitz, ils n'ont plus besoin de rien" (85-6). Amy is bewildered by the presence of her grandparents who do not speak and hardly move but whose eyes reveal the horrors they experienced before their death.

Prompted by her grandfather's ghost, Amy plans to set the house on fire, bringing peace to the troubled souls of her grandparents. However, another significant event leads to Amy's act of arson and murder. After completing her senior year of high school, Amy, along with her graduating peers, has the opportunity to spend two weeks in Cape Cod. For Amy, Cape Cod is as revelatory as her chance encounter with other native French speakers. Being away from her family for the first time in her life, Amy is able to imagine life beyond Bay City:

> Pour la première fois de ma vie, j'ai connu le bonheur, à perte de vue, en me promenant sur la plage et en avalant goulûment les cieux par mes yeux, par ma bouche, par tous les pores de ma peau. J'ai bu le bleu qui s'étalait au-dessus de moi. J'avais grand soif. J'étais si avide. Je n'avais été allaitée qu'au mauve saumâtre, infect du Michigan et jamais je n'avais pu penser que le ciel était réellement azur (59).

Her trip to the bay at Cape Cod also serves to contrast her musings regarding whether or not

there is a bay near Bay City. The bay of Cape Cod suggests potential for hope and happiness whereas the bay of Bay City is obstructed from Amy's view and experience in suburbia. Amy returns home with renewed hope and excitement for her future. She understands that she has to take charge of her own life, and for the first time she can imagine her future away from her family and the house in Bay City. She makes the decision to do as her mother did, leaving the past behind by moving away. The day before her 18th birthday, Amy is inspired to take her grandparents (or rather, their ghosts), Georges and Elsa, out of the basement to go for a drive. It is then that Georges tells her: "Il faut incendier le ciel. Mets donc le feu à tout cela" (191). Mavrikakis chooses vague instructions, mentioning only the sky specifically. Amy interprets his words to mean that the house must be set ablaze, and that with this fire, the traumatic memories inhabiting the skies will cease.

The day of July 4th, 1979 is Independence Day (which Mavrikakis notes in English at the start of the novel's chapter) both for the United States and for Amy, who has become an adult. Amy's uncle has painted a portrait of Amy for her birthday, and she notes that she appears mauve – the same color as the oppressive sky – in the painting. She also recognizes traits belonging to her grandparents. Her birthday begins typically for her with insults from her mother; Denise tells her that she is only there because Amy's birthday celebration is so important to Babette. Denise then criticizes Amy's appearance, which is the only example of direct discourse Mavrikakis attributes to Denise in the entire novel, emphasizing her cruelty. Amy notes, "Ma mère ne sait pas me parler sans m'insulter. Elle ne sait pas me regarder sans mépris. Cela ne changera jamais. Mais c'est sans importance. Le ciel est prêt à prendre feu. Toute ma douleur partira en fumée" (201). This fire is not just a means to end the nightmares of the Holocaust and bring peace to her grandparents. Amy's plan to avenge her mother's cruelty is the

culmination of bitter feelings and resentment. By this time, Denise has given birth to another child, a son named Angelo in honor of her first deceased daughter, Angie. Unlike Amy, Angelo is adored by his mother. Although Amy considers Angelo a mere aggravation, his relationship with Denise proves that Denise is in fact capable of maternal love. Only Amy is deprived of this maternal love.

While her family sleeps, Amy prepares to set the house on fire, but it is her grandparents, Georges and Elsa Rosenberg, who throw the torch into the room of the house. Mavrikakis leaves the culpability of Amy ambiguous and open to interpretation, although Amy certainly believes herself to be guilty. Georges and Elsa leap into the flames, recalling their experience at the gas chambers of Auschwitz, but this time it is their choice to enter into the fire. Amy observes, "Enfin, je meurs. Je suis délivrée" (248). Mavrikakis equates these deaths as a chance for peace. Georges and Elsa, through their active decision to re-experience their time at Auschwitz, find peace, while death for Amy offers the potential for an end to her nightmares and misery. However, Amy does not perish in the fire. Instead, she awakens in the tree house in the backyard and is found several days later; this discovery is considered a miracle by the local press, but Amy is mystified at how death once again has evaded her. Although she confesses her crime, the authorities do not believe her story: "J'ai eu beau crier que j'avais connu une joie horrifiée [. . .] en voyant la maison partir en fumée, dans le monde des hommes, dans l'espace des vivants, je suis innocente. Je n'ai rien fait. J'ai subi simplement un intense stress post-traumatique qui m'a donné un sentiment de culpabilité pathologique" (45). After repeatedly having her claims of culpability ignored or dismissed, Amy is determined to make amends for not only her own crime, but for the guilt and suffering she has carried on behalf of those relatives dead at Auschwitz. Amy puts her own name on her family's tombstone, along with the names of

her grandparents. She then officially changes her last name from Duchesnay to Rozenweig-Rosenberg, the hyphenated last names of her grandparents, which Amy later gives to her daughter Heaven. With this rebirth, Amy hopes to ease the torments of the past, because she embraces them through her name instead of denying them as her mother had done.

Mavrikakis implies that Amy's anguish is a result of the absence of parental love in her life. Amy's preoccupation with her Jewish ancestors, particularly those who died in the Holocaust, as well as with her deceased older sister, indicates that family is extremely important to her. From birth, Amy has experienced a dearth of love and attention from her parents. Amy's mother constantly insults her and refers to her as an "abrutie." Amy's father lives in New York and does not participate in her upbringing.Speaking of Mavrikakis's protagonist, Lequin observes that "Cette absence initiale d'amour s'avère un terrain fertile de révolte, de haine et de mépris" (245). Mavrikakis's narrator explains that Denise became pregnant in order to forget about her experiences during World War Two, and in fact, Denise and Babette became pregnant at the same time intentionally "pour donner vie à de petits Américains tout neufs qui leur feraient oublier les rages et les colères de l'Europe guerrière" (11). Because Denise had already given birth to her stillborn daughter, Angie, it is possible that her pregnancy with Amy was also an attempt to help her forget the pain of that loss. Babette, however, confides to Amy that Denise's love for Angie is false. Amy says, "Selon ma tante, l'apparente passion de ma mère pour Angie n'était qu'une façon d'avoir un pouvoir sur les autres, pourvoir que seul le malheur octroie" (71).

Denise's openness regarding Angie's birth and death, a significant but private family matter, contrasts her refusal to speak of their heritage. Additionally, Mavrikakis uses sex as a form of secrecy in her novel in a manner that parallels Denise's silence regarding the family background. Although Amy acknowledges different aspects of sexuality and reproduction in a

casual manner, including abortions, her stillborn sister, and the sexual behaviors of her peers at school. Amy is aware of "faiseuses d'anges" (27) among the girls at her high school. She characterizes the girls at her school (recalling the virgin/whore dichotomy) by using the image of knitting needles, either used to induce abortion or to knit baby clothing: "Quand on est mal prises, on s'entraide le week-end avec des aiguilles à tricoter dans les cuisines désertées par des parents parties faire des courses à Saginaw. Mais rien n'est vraiment sûr et les perforations d'utérus ou les hémorragies tragiques sont à craindre" (27). Amy compares the type of girls such as herself who have sex with boys with those who do not, "plus connes que nous" (27) and who dream of marriage and having children: "D'aiguilles à tricoter aussi, mais pour la layette de bébé" (28). Amy has no romantic notions regarding sexuality. She engages in sex with boys from her high school (referring to these acts as a means to "s'entraîner à l'hétérosexualité" (26)), and for her it is less about physical pleasure and more an attempt to avoid, or at least delay, her nighttime terrors.

Among the boys who wish to experiment sexually with Amy is her cousin Victor. Amy rejects his repeated offers: "Il est vrai que je couche avec n'importe qui ou n'importe quoi, mais je n'ai pas envie du fils de ma tante. Je n'ai aucun désir pour un type que se fait acheter ses Playboys par sa mère et qui boit un café infâme parce qu'il croit continuer ainsi à téter le sein maternel" (63). Part of Amy's disdain for Victor may stem partially from jealousy, as they have completely different experiences with their mothers. Mavrikakis often juxtaposes the two cousins together at home engaged in different activities that stress these differences; while Amy has to wolf down cold cereal before participating in housecleaning, Babette prepares a complete, hot breakfast for her son, who is not expected to complete chores. Although Babette supports Victor's sexual activity (by purchasing him condoms and pornographic magazines), she

expresses concern with Amy's sexuality, forbidding Amy to use tampons because she believes that they will technically remove Amy's (long gone) virginity. Additionally, when Amy is menstruating, Babette wakes her three or four times a night in order to ensure that she has not stained her bed and forces her to change her sanitary napkin, showing anxiety over Amy's reproductive functions. Mavrikakis describes Babette's frenetic house-cleaning rituals in great detail, stressing that they cause an uproar to the regular household routines (Denise becomes so agitated by Babette's housecleaning that she regularly leaves town when Babette expresses her plans to clean). Amy compares Babette's fanatic cleaning to sexual pleasure, observing that "le nettoyage de la maison constitue, à cette époque, le seul plaisir physique que ma tante se permette. Pour elle, comme pour les filles et les femmes de Bay City, la jouissance ne peut venir d'un exercice sexuel [. . .] elle est le fruit d'un ordre domestique, national, cosmique basé sur une régulation méthodique des vies" (67). Amy suggests that for Babette, as well as for other Bay City women, cleaning offers the pleasure of control.

In their epistolary book entitled *Ventriloquies* (2003), Mavrikakis and Martine Delvaux explore mother-daughter relationships and various aspects of women's sexuality, including reproductive experiences, which complement those themes addressed in Mavrikakis's fictional work. Their title, the French word for ventriloquisms, plays with the word "ventre" as well as "soliloquies" ("soliloques" in French); the text is, in fact, an exchange of personal musings (in letter form) regarding these two authors' reproductive experiences. As ventriloquists speak through their dummies, here Mavrikakis and Delvaux give voice to the "ventre," meditating upon various aspects of motherhood. For Mavrikakis, the "ventre" is especially significant as her daughter was born via Caesarian section. Mavrikakis observes that it took her a longer time than other women to recover both physically and emotionally from giving birth "et pourtant,

mon sexe ne fut pas déchiré par l'enfant. Mon sexe est resté le mien. [. . .] C'est dans le ventre que ma fille a fait son trou. Dans le ventre qu'elle a creusé sa niche" (148). Besides the postpartum depression and physical healing disclosed by Mavrikakis, both women broach other aspects of women's reproduction (such as abortion and miscarriage) that are not frequently evoked in literature or even acknowledged among people. They recommend that these topics should be discussed openly and without shame, and that the shared experience of motherhood and daughterhood has the potential to bring women together. The authors frequently evoke the writings of other female authors (including Annie Ernaux, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar, Laure Adler, Pierrette Fleutiaux, Christine Angot, Camille Laurens and Jamaica Kincaid). Through their examples of other writers, Mavrikakis and Delvaux illustrate the potential of writing to link together women of different generations and of different nationalities. Delvaux uses the metaphor of writing as an experience of giving birth: "L'écriture est création et, pour moi, même si c'est là un vieux cliché, l'écriture est liée à la reproduction. Écrire concerne la maternité et la filiation" (57). By writing about their own personal struggles related to pregnancy and their own mother-daughter relationships (both as mothers and as daughters themselves), Mavrikakis and Delvaux give a voice to the experiences that are pertinent to many women. *Ventriloquies*, written in the traditionally "feminine" epistolary format, transforms their intimate correspondence into a public, shared experience.

In their initial correspondence, both authors refer to their own perinatal losses that sparked the communication between them and inspired the creation of this text. When they first met, Mavrikakis had recently had an abortion. Since that time, Mavrikakis has given birth to her daughter but Delvaux experienced a miscarriage. Both women have grieved their losses, and they recognize that their terminated pregnancies represent a form of both infanticide and

matricide, as their losses also (temporarily in thecase of Mavrikakis) prevented them from becoming mothers. Mavrikakis suggests to her friend that Delvaux's miscarriage was a test to see if she was in fact ready to make the sacrifices required of motherhood: "Peut-être qu'il fallait en passer par là, pour que tu saches de quoi tu es capable, toi, la tueuse de mère, la tueuse d'enfants" (17). Delvaux, supports this reasoning and recalls Annie Ernaux's *L'Évenément*, in which Ernaux claims that she needed to undergo her abortion in order to become a mother. Delvaux uses Ernaux's experience to muse that, "il faudrait, pour devenir mère, être prête à tout perdre autant qu'à tout donner" (21).[78] However, a few months later, Delvaux reveals that she has had a second miscarriage. She describes her depression, bewilderment and shame of having experienced yet another failed pregnancy. Delvaux observes that miscarriages, despite their frequency, remain a taboo subject both in society and in literature (with a few exceptions such as Ernaux's text), which prevents women such as herself from feeling anything other than isolation:

> On n'écrit pas ceci, on n'écrit rien sur le ventre plein puis vide, rond puis plat. La vie qui commence et qui finit. [. . .] On n'écrit pas sur l'infâme tache de sang au creux du sous-vêtement. Elle apparaît et on n'y croit pas, on se dit que ce n'est pas vrai, que ça ne finira pas ainsi, dans l'événement d'une tache de sang (79-80).

In response to Delvaux's grief, Mavrikakis reminds her that there may be other miscarriages in her future because that risk presents itself with each pregnancy: "Tout désir, ton désir, est une fausse couche possible" (86). The authors recall other texts written on infant loss, such as *Outside* by Duras: "l'horreur de la survie, de la vie qui continue malgré cette expérience qu'on décrit comme la plus terrible: la perte de sa progéniture. Il n'y aurait rien de pire que cette expérience-là de la mort. Et ces femmes continuent à écrire" (55).[79] Despite the traumas of abortion and miscarriage, these authors believe that having a stillborn infant or a baby who dies

would be the most traumatic experience for a parent Mavrikakis and Delvaux's discussion of infant loss recalls Denise's grieving of Angie in *Le Ciel de Bay City*. Although Amy resents her older sister Angie and Babette accuses Denise of merely pretending to mourn Angie's death, there is potential for genuine grief suffered by Denise that may help explain (although does not justify) her cruelty toward Amy.

In both her novel and *Ventriloquies*, Mavrikakis explores the traumas that arise from withholding secrets, which persist within us. Mavrikakis and Delvaux each speak of having the feeling of still carrying her aborted /miscarried fetus within her body. Mavrikakis admits, "Je repense souvent à l'enfant avorté. Il n'a pas de nom. Pas de visage, pas d'odeur. Il est de la couleur du sang. [. . .] Il y a eu cet avortement, que je ne regrette pas, mais dont le sens m'échappe" (25-6). Although these deeply personal and physical losses contrast the loss of family history (both the literal loss – deaths – of those relatives at Auschwitz as well as her sister Angie, as well as the figurative loss – denial – of the family's past), Mavrikakis describes Amy's experiences as a collective loss.

Because of the inevitability of past lives and experiences influencing the present, Mavrikakis considers each type of loss worthy of grief and acknowledgement. The influence of the past upon the present also reflects itself as Mavrikakis and Delvaux consider the significance of names given to themselves and their children. Delvaux avoids the use of her middle name, given to her in honor of a deceased relative: "C'est le prénom de la mort, un prénom tué dans l'œuf, qui dit qu'on porte toujours des morts à l'intérieur de soi, que des fantômes hantent notre nom" (29). On the other hand, Mavrikakis chooses her daughter's name carefully, and in part to honor the dead: "Savannah Lou" was named after the city where she was born (Savannah, Georgia, where Savannah's father is from). In *Ventriloquies*, Mavrikakis speaks particularly of

the history of slavery in Georgia: "J'ai choisi ce prénom pour que ça parle noir en ma fille, à travers elle. Pour que l'esprit des esclaves noirs qui erre devant ma porte en ce moment se mette à danser quand je crierai son nom" (24). An unnamed as such but acknowledged sense of white privilege is present in both *Le Ciel de Bay City* and *Ventriloquies.*[80] In *Ventroliquies,* Mavrikakis describes herself as an immigrant to the United States, yet she expresses an emotional awareness of this country's history of slavery as well as massacres and injustices carried out toward Native Americans. In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Heaven's father, John Ross, is a Native American. Although their relationship was of little importance to Amy, and in fact, she is not certain whether John is actually Heaven's biological father, she is proud for Heaven to become close to him. In identifying with the Cherokee tribe of John's origins, Amy hopes that Heaven will be less likely to obsess over her European roots: "J'ai toujours eu peur que ma fille hérite de la violence du passé de l'Europe. J'ai toujours craint qu'elle n'aime que l'Amérique blanche que j'ai connue enfant" (210). However, Heaven learns of racial and sexual discrimination within the Cherokee tribe and becomes disappointed and saddened over her heritage. Amy realizes that there is global violence within everyone's heritage and that it cannot be avoided: "À ce moment-là, j'ai eu peur pour ma fille. J'ai craint sa terrible déception. La pureté de la race hante encore le ciel américain. [. . .] J'ai voulu la consoler en lui répétant que de toute façon je n'étais pas tout à fait sûre qu'il soit son père. [. . .] On n'a pas à subir à ses racines, après tout" (210-1). Despite her fear, Amy wants to teach Heaven everything about their family's background, and she brings her to Auschwitz and does not discourage her (although she does not accompany Heaven) from traveling to Bay City. Additionally, in *Ventriloquies*, Mavrikakis plans a trip to Greece in order to introduce her daughter to her origins.

Mavrikakis contemplates her relationships with both her daughter, Savannah, still an

infant at the time of the authors' correspondence, and her own mother. Both Mavrikakis and Delvaux agree that mother-daughter relationships are complex. Mavrikakis describes the unconditional love, even adoration, she felt as a child for her mother. However, her own mother, much like Denise in her novel *Le Ciel de Bay City*, did not express love or affection toward her. Yet they shared a bed together until Mavrikakis was fourteen years old. Her father being often away, Mavrikakis assumed the role of husband: "J'ai longtemps dormi avec ma mère, et ce n'est pourtant pas son affection que je me rappelle, ni son amour, mais son plaisir à m'humilier, à me détruire. Elle me faisait dormir avec elle pour me faire sentir combien je n'étais rien pour elle" (42). Like Amy in *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Mavrikakis claims she often longed for death as a child. As an adult, she eventually realized that this desire was internalized due to her mother projecting the wish that Mavrikakis die. However, according to Mavrikakis, she never stopped loving her mother or wishing for her mother to love her in return. Always hoping for approval, she says she experienced the shame – at 40 years old – of disappointing and disobeying her mother by becoming pregnant. As a mother herself, Mavrikakis describes the constant fear of losing her child, as well as her shocked realization that she can no longer indulge in fantasies about suicide, as her death would affect not just her mother (she describes the pleasure of imagining her mother mourning her death), but her daughter also. Mavrikakis does not share a bed with Savannah, despite her desire to do so, as she wants her daughter to be more independent than she was. Mavrikakis is confident that Savannah, unlike herself, will know that she is loved.

The desire to maintain physical proximity with one's daughter is expressed by Amy in *Le Ciel de Bay City*. As a young adult, Heaven lives in an apartment in the basement of Amy's house, and they share a bed every night until Heaven is over 20 years old. As a child, Heaven was not able to fall asleep alone, and Amy maintained the habit of sleeping together in order to

protect her daughter from the night terrors that haunted her as a child: "Autour de ma fille, j'ai construit un rempart contre l'histoire, j'ai creusé des fosses gigantesques pour que les mauvais rêves, les cauchemars grimaçants, les souvenirs-croquemitaines ne puissent jamais passer" (284). Heaven's decision to stop coming into Amy's bed comes as a shock for Amy, but she knows that Heaven is old enough to be more independent. Perhaps, too, Amy thinks, her nightly presence is causing Heaven more harm than good, as Amy carries with her the sadness and depression lingering from the Holocaust during the nighttime hours, whereas Heaven is joyful and embraces life. Yet one night, after hearing some strange noises coming from her daughter's bedroom in the basement, Amy is curious and a bit concerned. Sad cries and moans emerge from Heaven's room; Amy peeks in and is devastated to discover her entire deceased family present around Heaven's bed:

> Je reconnais immédiatement mon grand-père Georges Rosenberg. À l'autre bout du lit, ma grand-mère ronfle [. . .] Je scrute la chambre. Sur le sol sont étendus pêle-mêle ma tante Babette, mon oncle Gustavo, ma mère Denise, mon cousin Victor, mon petit frère Angelo, ma sœur Angie tout bébé [. . .] Les miens sont tous là autour du lit de ma fille, de mon Heaven. Je voudrais crier. Hurler de douleur. Ma fille chérie habite elle aussi l'histoire. (292)

Despite Amy's attempts to prevent the same pain and suffering that she has experienced her entire life in her daughter by loving her and sharing fully with Heaven their family's history, the past has come to inhabit her daughter.

In both her fictional and nonfictional text, Mavrikakis depicts the United States as a country of illusion and disillusion. Amy recognizes the hypocrisy of the 4th of July celebration:

> Et les âmes des Juifs morts se mêlent dans mon esprit à celles des Indiens d'Amérique

> exterminés ici et là, sur cette terre. Ils sont tous là présents en moi parce que l'Amérique, du Michigan au Nouveau-Mexique, c'est cela. Un territoire hanté par les morts d'ici ou d'ailleurs, venus de partout, un territoire encore troué comme une passoire, même après le 11 septembre, les barricades et les fortifications frontalières. (53)

Regarding the United States as a "melting pot" of cultures and ethnicities, Amy argues that Americans are in denial about the misdoings of their country's past, as well as ignorant about the transnational histories brought into the United States by immigrants.[81] In an interview, Mavrikakis muses that immigrants carry the histories of their countries within them: "C'est vrai qu'il y a différentes façons d'avoir ce rapport au passé, je ne dis pas que les immigrants n'ont pas un rapport au passé, je ne dis pas ça du tout, mais il est peut-être moins spatial. Peut-être que finalement ils ne peuvent le mettre hors d'eux, il est plutôt en eux" (cited in Freytag, 2). In *Ventriloquies*, Delvaux and Mavrikakis discuss at length their own impressions of the United States. Mavrikakis describes living in Savannah, Georgia, and she meditates upon the impact of the history of slavery in the United States. Delvaux lives in Quebecc but travels occasionally to the United States at the time of their correspondence. Their letters span from July 2001 through August 2002, and both women react to the impact of the attacks of September 11, 2011: "Ça parle sans cesse, ca n'arrête pas de parler, ça cause, mais qu'est-ce que ça cause . . . Ça piaille, ça crie, ça dit n'importe quoi. Il n'y a que de la rumeur" (32). Mavrikakis observes that despite all of this noisy discussion about revenge and violent bloodlust, Americans generally avoid talking honestly about the causes of the events of September 11. Delvaux is bewildered by what she observes as the "calme, normale" (39) Americans she encounters in the days and weeks following the attacks. Both authors recognize the hypocrisy of a country that has declared itself a victim after having been engaged in war for years and having caused its own acts of genocide

and inequities.

In her novel, Mavrikakis uses K-Mart as a metaphor for the superficial and present-day only values of the United States. Amy finds pleasure in working her shifts "à l'ombre des néons bleus, blanc et rouge du K-Mart. [. . .] L'Amérique est ouverte vingt-quatre heures sur vingt-quatre" (124-5). Mavrikakis ironically notes the constant stimuli of music, lights, and distractions of the United States that, like a 24-hour convenience store, thrives on cheap and homogenous consumption. At K-Mart, Amy is able to live in the present and to enjoy small pleasures such as the nail polish and magazines sold there because "K-Mart est sans histoire" (126). The sterile appearance hides any traces of disarray or problems. When the ghosts of Amy's grandparents inadvertently step into K-Mart, they are terrified by the noises and lights. Amy realizes that K-Mart, as a microcosm of the United States, ignores the past: "[K-Mart] est un lieu pour ceux qui n'ont aucune mémoire, où le passé n'est écrit nulle part. [. . .] Le temps décline les *top ten* du présent que l'on abolira vite pour en créer d'autres" (196). Like the observations of Delvaux and Mavrikakis on the mentality of Americans post-September 11, the United States as a country is aware only of its present state, ignoring any historical misdeeds. Mavrikakis describes this false state of presence in America: "C'est vrai que c'est un pays, un continent qui est moins vieux, mais je pense que c'est quand même un mythe que tout est nouveau" (cited in Freytag, 3). Although America has a relatively short history (compared to Western European history and its history that does not include the history of the indigenous American Indians), it is easy to focus solely on the present. But the history of the rest of the world is carried to America within each of its immigrants. Disgusted with the state of denial of the living in post-September 11 America, Mavrikakis embraces the dead in *Ventroliquies*: "Les vivants me donnent envie de vomir. [. . .] J'ai soif des morts. C'est à mes amis morts que je

pense en ce moment. Ce sont eux qui pourraient me rassurer sur tout cela, eux qui sont passés déjà depuis longtemps de l'autre côté de la rumeur du monde" (34-5). Just as Mavrikakis longs for the reassurance of the dead, in *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Amy's obsession with her deceased relatives serves to reflect her indifference toward her living family and peers.

In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Mavrikakis depicts two generations of mother-daughter relationships. She contrasts the tension between Denise and Amy with the loving openness between Amy and Heaven. Mavrikakis implies that Denise's shunning of Amy is linked to her desire to forget all about her life in Europe, including her Jewish upbringing and World War Two. The past is present within Amy, however, and she understands that it is important and unavoidable to acknowledge their family's history. By setting fire to her family's home, she is carrying out the wish of her grandparents' ghosts to reconcile with their traumatic experience at Auschwitz, but she is also ending the life of Denise, along with the rest of her immediate family. As a mother herself, Amy yearns to protect her daughter (whom she genuinely loves) from the nightmares of her own unhappy childhood. By revealing everything she can about Heaven's ancestry, as well as confessing her crime of arson and murder to her daughter, Amy believes that Heaven will be free of the painful memories of the past. Amy learns, however, that the past is always within us and Heaven is as affected by their family's history as she has been herself. Mavrikakis's protagonist finally accepts the ghosts of the past, joining them at Heaven's bedside: "Un long temps je reste appuyée contre la porte. Je me décide enfin. J'enjambe les corps sans les réveiller. Je me couche à même le sol parmi les chiennes et les humains. J'enlace le petit corps d'Angie et me blottis contre ma mère. Tout est doux" (292). In an act of forgiveness, she embraces those that she resented the most, thereby finally making peace with the past by making amends with her mother.

Conclusion

The Mother as Guardian of the Heart(h)?

The varied depictions of motherhood in the texts of Quebecc included here serve as a contrast to the simplified view of women often perpetuated in North American society and literature even today. The "mommy wars" remain in full-swing, as arguments over the "best" or "correct" ways to parent thrive (these discussions are nearly always aimed at and are often perpetuated by women).[82] The "war on women" taking place in the United States recalls Adrienne Rich's claims that motherhood serves patriarchy, as restrictions on women's reproductive rights increase and women-as-mothers remain heavily scrutinized. Rich's claims that women's real experiences contrast the idealization of motherhood remain true today:

> The woman with children is a prey to far more complicated, subversive feelings. Love and anger can exist concurrently; anger at the conditions of motherhood can become translated into anger at the child, along with fear that we are not 'loving;' grief at all we cannot do for our children in a society so inadequate to meet human needs becomes translated into guilt and self-laceration. [. . .] The mother's very character, her status as a woman, are in question if she has 'failed' her children" (52).

The continuing debates over women's roles as mothers make my study, and others like it, especially relevant. As a complement to this study, an in-depth look at the representation of fathers in these literary texts would be interesting, although, in general, the authors studied here give less importance to the fathers than to the mothers (exceptions include the father in Théoret's *Laurence*, in Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* and in Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* (and even then, he is overshadowed by the grandmother)). In *The Reproduction of Mothering*, Nancy Chodorow argues that in the family structure, "mothers are and have been the child's

primary caretaker, socializer, and inner object; fathers are secondary objects for boys and girls" (96). Although this oedipal interpretation is an outdated look at family structures, the children in the works studied here spend considerably more time and energy focusing on their mothers than on their fathers. Part of this imbalance may be due to the fact that fathers are absent in many of these works, whether physically away (*La Belle Bête, Le Torrent,* Paul in *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte, Le Ciel de Bay City*, Emma's father in *Le Livre d'Emma*) or emotionally absent (*L'Ingratitude*, *Bonheur d'Occasion*, "Pur Polyester," *L'Obéissance,* the *Aurore* film and novel).

Although the literary texts studied here range from canonical (*Maria Chapdelaine, Bonheur d'Occasion, Le Torrent*) to lesser-known (the works by France Théoret, for example), the recurring themes are striking. Whether the mother figure is depicted as loving or cruel, nearly every protagonist longs for a loving relationship with his or her mother, which confirms the importance given by these authors to mother-chid relationships. For example, in Tremblay's *La Grosse femme d'à côté est enceinte,* Édouard longs for his mother's approval despite their constant fighting; his relationship with Victoire is mportant to the extent that it has become his sole obsession. Although several authors included here depict "good" (loving, nurturing) mothers (Hémon, Roy, Saint-Martin, Tremblay), anti-maternal women figure heavily (Blais, Agnant, Théoret) and child abuse is a recurring motif (Hébert, Jacob, Chen, and the *Aurore* texts). Yet consistent in nearly every text is sympathy for the mother figure, whether the author depicts her as a "guardian of the hearth" or as a cruel woman. The violence within so many of these texts, whether they depict matricide or infanticide, is at least partially justified due to the societal repression of women. Despite having been raised by an abusive mother, Marie in Suzanne Jacob's *L'Obéissance* still desires to cultivate a loving relationship with her mother

whom she loves despite herself. recalls Yan-Zi's preoccupation with her mother, whom she both loves and resents, in Ying Chen's *L'Ingratitude.* Chen evokes sympathy for Yan-Zi's mother by recalling the mother's own abusive chldhood as well as her strained relationship with her distant husband. Claudine in *Le Torrent* appears monstrous and not quite human to her son, but Hébert makes it clear that the institution of religion that condemns unwed mothers is to blame for Claudine's cruelty. In Marie-Célie Agnant's *Le Livre d'Emma,* Emma explains that it is better for her daughter to die as a young child than to grow up in a racist, sexist world; the refusal of Doctor MacLeod to attempt to understand Emma and the multiple acts of silencing Emma (by refusing to approve her thesis and by cancelling her courtroom defense) support Emma's reasoning.

Agnant is one of several authors who depict their characters both as mothers and as children themselves. In Marie-Claire Blais's *La Belle Bête*, Isabelle-Marie's resentment towards her own mother remains a preoccupation even when she becomes a parent herself. Isabelle-Marie is unable to change the family's obsession with beauty, and she cannot bring herself to love her own ugly daughter. On the other hand, Mavrikakis's protagonist Amy in *Le Ciel de Bay City* succeeds in cultivating an emotionally close relationship with her daughter Heaven that contrasts Amy's strained relationship with her own mother. Amy discovers, however, that her maternal love is not powerful enough to erase the secrets of her family's painful history. Rose-Anna, in Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion,* genuinely loves her children and being a mother herself, and she resents feeling like a helpless child when she visits her own strict and unloving mother.

In this dissertation, I posit that the depictions of mothers in each literary text included here signify important trends and social or political changes occurring in Quebecc at the

time of its publication and/or its setting. Even if her role within the home appears minor, maintaining what Rich refers to as her "powerless responsibility" (28), her symbolic significance is not without importance. For example, the nameless, silent mother in Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* serves to critique the very expectations she embodies. The hardworking mother observed in France Théoret's *Laurence* motivates her daughter to strive for financial independence, as does the narrator's mother in Lori Saint-Martin's "Pur Polyester." Saint-Martin's short storyevokes the experiences of some immigrants, and the mother's linguistic dependence upon her daughter encourages her daughter to pursue an education to achieve social, linguistic and economic success in Quebecc. The narrator imagines her future in Quebecc, recalling Maria Chadeplaine imagining her own future in Quebecc nearly a century earlier in Louis Hémon's novel. Other daughters are driven to separate themselves from their mothers' homes and lifestyles; Héloïse in Blais's *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* searches for physical and financial security in a brothel, and France Théoret's protagonists discover that professional success for women requires that she remain single and childless. As different as each of the mothers are in the literary works included in my dissertation, the desire to belong – within the family structure or within the protagonist's locale – remains consistent throughout Quebecc's narrative prose throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries.

Endnotes

[1] In his study on the birthrate of Quebec, Daniel Fournier argues that the role of the Catholic Church was just one of several factors that led to Quebec's birthrate being significantly higher than (oftentimes double that of) anglophone Canada throughout the 19th century and into the 20th century: "Les auteurs anglo-protestants exagèrent facilement [. . .] l'influence de l'Église. [. . .] Même de nos jours, il s'en trouve pour prendre au mot cette caricature classique: un vieux modèle de curé, en soutane, qui sermonne un de ses paroissiens sur le besoin de faire beaucoup de petits. [. . .] Mais c'est en vain que vous chercherez dans les lettres circulaires de l'épiscopat québécois de l'époque une insistance particulière sur la procréation" (174).

[2] The *romans du terroir* dominate Quebec's literature from the mid 1800s through World War Two. These novels often idealize Quebec's agrarian culture and usually focus on the transmittance of land from father to son.

[3] The Collectif Clio, a group of historians who focus on exposing women's history in Quebec, observe that in the 1940s, "les revues féminines glorifient cette redécouverte de la vie domestique. Les mécaniciennes du temps de la guerre doivent être dorénavant des mères de famille hors pair" (384).

[4] Although Roy is considered one of Quebec's best-known authors, she is not native to Quebec, having spent the first thirty years of her life as part of the francophone minority in Manitoba. In her study of Roy's bicultural and bilingual background entitled *Between Languages and Cultures: Colonial and Postcolonial Readings of Gabrielle Roy*, Rosemary Chapman observes that "[Roy] is regularly claimed as a founding figure of Quebec literature. [. . .] After a passing acknowledgement of Roy's birth in Saint-Boniface, many critics and literary historians have assimilated her unproblematically into the canon of Quebec literature" (5).

[5] Brossard's remarks are quoted in Christine Makward's article, "Quebec Women Writers" (Women and Literature 7.1 (Winter 1979): 3).

[6] At the end of his article on language in Quebec, Joseph Melançon mentions Denise Boucher as an example of a feminist writer who rejected cultural models of language use, but notes that Quebec's writing's "search for authenticity has been undertaken in a masculine context which masks other priorities" (29).

[7] While conscious of the political implications of the terms "national" and "Québécois" when referring to Quebec's identity, my use of these terms does not refer to my personal opinion on the status of Quebec as a province or a soverign country. I use "Québécois" instead of the English term "Quebecker" due to personal preference. Likewise, I refer to Quebec's "national identity" as an acknowledgement of Quebec's unique cultural and linguistic heritage.

[8] Much has been written on the joual controversy that is commonly said to have been sparked by Tremblay's play. Of this debate, Tremblay himself remarked, "I think it's stupid to be ashamed of [joual]. (. . . .) I don't know why in Quebec I wouldn't have the right to use the language that

my people speak – and they do, they do speak like that, it's not true that they don't." ("Michel Tremblay defends joual." *CBC Digital Archives. 5 July 1972.* Web. 3 August 2011).

[9] In "On 'The Reproduction of Mothering:' a Methodological Debate," Judith Lorber, Rose Coser, and Alice Rossi provide written critiques of Chodorow's study for, among other reasons, her essentialist arguments. This written debate also includes a response by Chodorow herself, defending her work with mostly biological/psychological explanations.

[10] Kristeva's essay was originally published with the title "Héréthique de l'amour" in *Tel Quel* vol. 74 (Winter 1977). It was reprinted as "Stabat Mater" in Kristeva's *Histoires d'amour* in 1983.

[11] Karen Gould specifically cites Jovette Marchessault and France Théoret as specific authors who were influenced by these theorists.

[12] In her article entitled, "Mother's Pain, Mother's Voice: Gabriela Mistral, Julia Kristeva, and the Mater Dolorosa," Margaret Bruzelius offers a compelling analysis of several texts, including those by Kristeva and Rich, wherein she observes that maternal speech is "validated by maternal suffering only the woman of sorrow, bound in a uniquely painful relation with her offspring, may give tongue" (217).

[13] Postpartum depression is increasingly recognized as affecting (to varying degrees) a large percentage of women not only who give birth, but also who miscarry or otherwise suffer perinatal loss.

[14] Tremblay's notes for this play indicate that "[Cuirette] est un beu qui a vieilli et qui a engraissé; sa veste de cuir, jadis moulante et provocante, ne ferme plus depuis longemps et ses vieux jeans trop serrés moulent plus de suif que de muscles" (14)). The weight gain ("softness") of Cuirette emphasizes his femininity.

[15] The original broadcast of Charles de Gaulle's speech makes evident the emotionally charged reaction of the spectators. See: "Vive le Quebec libre." *CBC Digital Archives. 24 July 1967.* Web. 3 August 2011).

[16] Pauline Julien's 1974 recording of "Mommy" is available online: "Pauline Julien – Mommy (1974). *YouTube.* 12 February 2011. Web. 2 September 2012.

[17] In *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatigue* (1985), Dany Laferrière plays with this sexualized discourse by having his Haitian-Québécois narrator sleep only with "rich, white, English girls," thereby reversing the linguistic/national dynamics while maintaining the heteronormative gender roles.

[18]See: *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar. In this text, Gilbert and Gubar argue for feminist re-readings of American and English 19th-century texts.

[19] The title of Roch Carrier's *La Guerre, Yes Sir!* (1968) succinctly illustrates this political use of code-switching.

[20] Roberts defends Vallières's potentially sexist remarks: "One could argue that feminist/gender analysis was not sufficiently developed at the time to allow [Vallières] to see how gender roles were produced and codified by society (299). After an observation that Vallières imagines an exclusively male revolution, she says "In all fairness to Vallières, this erasure, I would conclude, does not stem from any conscious aggressive ill-feeling toward women's participation, but from an entire movement's inability to conceive of women other than as mothers: hated, contested, yet needed as social and biological reproducers of the nation" (302).

[21] In *Between Languages and Cultures: Colonial and Postcolonial Readings of Gabrielle Roy,* Rosemary Chapman observes that it was in fact the English translation of *Bonheur d'Occasion* that brought Gabrielle Roy "international recognition and gave her the financial security to pursue a literary career." (152)

[22] The concept of *écriture féminine* was first articulated by Hélène Cixous in "Le Rire de la Méduse" (1975), and it is primarily associated with French feminists Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray as well as Cixous, whose works influenced the feminist writers of Quebec.

[23] See for example Saint-Martin's "The Other Family Romance: Daughters and Fathers in Quebec Women's Fiction of the Nineties" in *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s* (169-85).

[24] A version of this chapter with the same title is published in *(In)Scribing Gender: International Women Writers and the Creative Process* (edited by Jen Bouchard, Diversion Press, forthcoming).

[25] Often poor and orphaned, these young women were sent by Louis XIV to boost the population of Quebec. In *Le Quebec: Un pays, une culture,* Tétu de Labsade claims that these young women were often happy to take advantage of this opportunity that offered the potential for a more comfortable life than in France: "[Les *filles du Roy*] préféraient l'aventure de la Nouvelle-France à l'avenir encore plus incertain qui les attendait dans la métropole" (54).

[26] Green observes that the *romans du terroir* are characterized by what she terms 'the family plot," in which the family's story (as well as the story of their "plot" of land) as a whole is valorized, rather than the history of an individual protagonist (49). Although Maria Chapdelaine is the first female heroine of this genre, this novel tells the story of her entire family.

[27] Although this scene is ambiguous in terms of Florentine's consent, it is clear that Jean uses force and that Florentine had not invited Jean over with the intention of having sex with him. Additionally, Roy implies Florentine's lack of consent after Jean leaves, disgusted with himself "non à cause du *visage de souffrance de Florentine,* qui flottait devant son regard, mais parce

qu'il éprouvait le sentiment très net d'avoir iremédiablement engagé sa liberté" (210 my emphasis).

[28] In Juliette Roger's analysis of "Food and the Generation Gap in Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'Occasion*," Roger notes that throughout the novel, Florentine is disgusted by the smell and appearance of food, particularly at the restaurant where she works. She is surrounded by food all day but does not eat it, which is a contrast to the other characters who are constantly hungry, even malnourished. Her lack of appetite at the restaurant at which she and Jean dine irritates Jean as he has observed her extreme thinness and wants to feed her a substantial meal. This dynamic between Jean and Florentine is later repeated between Florentine and Rose-Anna, as Florentine insists on buying her mother a meal and resents Rose-Anna's reluctance to accept it.

[29] In Isabelle Engeli's study of the history of abortion and reproductive technology in France and Switzerland, she notes that while France had always had strict laws and consequences pertaining to abortion, "la répression de l'avortement se fit encore plus sévère avec la montée en puissance du discours nataliste en France, suite à la première guerre mondiale" (87).

[30] Tétu de Labsade defines the *Révolution Tranquille* as taking place during the decade of the 1960s and prompted by the election of Jean Lesage and his liberal party into the Quebec general election. Lesage launched several important economic and social reforms that inspired the people of Quebec to "construire des bases solides pour le développement d'un pays que l'on a plaisir à nommer le Quebec et du people qui l'a fait depuis quatre siècles" (51).

[31] Jacques Parizeau, the premier of Quebec at the time of the 1995 referendum, infamously said during televised remarks: "C'est vrai, c'est vrai qu'on a été battus, au fond, par quoi? Par l'argent puis des votes ethniques, essentiellement." (A recording of this speech is available online: "Jacques Parizeau: 30 octobre 1995." *YouTube.* 4 May 2010. Web. 4 August 2012).

[32] See *Linguistic Identities and Policies in France and the French-Speaking World* (Dawn Marley et al.) for details regarding the distinctions between "standard French" and its varieties within the francophone world. *Langue, espace, société: les variétés du français en amérique du nord* (C. Poirier et al.) provides a comprehensive analysis of the variations of French spoken within North America.

[33] The following website has been immensely useful in my own research of the case of Aurore Gagnon: http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/gagnon/accueil/indexen.html. This website offers biographical information of everyone involved in the case of Aurore Gagnon, excerpts from newspaper articles related to this case, and the chronology of the numerous novels, films and plays based on this legend.

[34] Several years after the publication of *Le Drame d'Aurore,* Yves Thériault published (under his own name) *Agaguk* (1958), his best-known work.

[35] J. Robert Choquette, a professor of Canadian Religious History, describes the "Duplessis orphans" as a "major cultural trauma" that illustrated the extent of the power wielded by the Catholic Church (cited in DePalma).

[36] The DVD of the film includes a bonus explanation of the history of the film. It reveals that Aurore's father attempted to stop the production of the film: "Télesphore Gagnon et des membres de la famille entreprennent une requête d'injonction intérimaire pour tenter d'empêcher la sortie du fim. Leur cause et rejetée."

[37] It is unknown whether Aurore suffered any sexual abuse; it is significant, however, that in the film, her age has been increased to 12 years old (the real Aurore Gagnon died at the age of 10), and the potential (yet very subtle) sexualization of Aurore by her stepmother occurs in an additional scene, when she lies, saying that she caught Aurore kissing Maurice in the attic.

[38] Cited on: http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/gagnon/suites/indexen.html. This site describes the mixed feelings of the public for the Gagnon couple. Because Aurore's stepmother was pregnant at the time of her arrest, her hanging was delayed and then changed to life imprisonment. Aurore's father was released from prison after serving only five years of his life sentence.

[39] This letter, among others, are provided on the following website: http://www.canadianmysteries.ca/sites/gagnon/accueil/indexen.html.

[40] Although the manifesto itself only sold around 200 copies at the time of its publication, its influence was significant in the years leading up to the *Révolution Tranquille*.

[41] Goldmann analyses both *La Belle Bête* and *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* and claims that the primary difference between these two texts is that La Belle Bête is completely pessimistic whereas *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel* ends on a somewhat optimistic note. In his otherwise excellent analysis of the family dynamics in these two novels, Goldmann makes no mention of the mother in *Une Saison dans la vie d'Emmanuel*; he notes only the role of the grandmother, the father, and the children. This lapse can be seen as evidence of success on the part of Blais to render the mother completely unimportant and silent.

[42] While Patrice is given feminine characteristics, Isabelle-Marie is likewise given masculine traits: it is she who does all the physical labor on the farm. She is given "le plus ingrat du travail"(11) and her physical strength contrasts Patrice's lassitude.

[43] Faust also constantly imitates animals to Patrice's delight. His animalistic imitations serve two purposes: they comfort Patrice, who has always been more comfortable keeping company with animals rather than people, and, as Faust invites Patrice to mount him when he pretends to be a cat or a horse (169), Blais implies a homosexual relationship.

[44] In a chapter on "symboles de la mère" Sœur Sainte-Marie Eleuthère analyzes water as a symbol of the mother in both *Le Torrent* and *La Belle Bête*. She sees the deaths of both François and Patrice as "un retour au sein maternel" (64).

[45] In her article, Manheimer analyses the ("terrible") mothers in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and George Eliot's *Adam Bede*.

[46] Tremblay's *Encore une fois, si vous permettez* (1998) is a two-person play depicting a mother-son relationship. In this text, Tremblay's homage to his mother focuses on the narrator as a child and young adult and on how his mother inspires him to become an artist.

[47] A mentioning of Queen Victoria during the speech of the prostitute Ti Lou's speech ("J'ai régné sur Ottawa comme la reine Victoria sur son empire" additionally contrasts the lack of reign of Victoire (75)). While Ti Lou's sexuality has brought her power equal to that of a queen, Victoire remains powerless at home.

[48] The majority of the Québécois population voted against overseas conscription, whereas the majority of the rest of Canada voted for it (Linteau, et. al. 18-9), which did not, however, reflect the overall attitude of Quebec regarding the war: "L'attitude des Québécois face à la guerre ne se résume pas à leur rejet de l'enrôlement obligatoire. Ils sont peu sensibilisés et mal informés sur les motifs du conflit et sur la situation en Europe. Ils sont néanmoins beaucoup plus nombreux à s'enrôler que pendant la Première Guerre. [. . .] Le désir d'échapper au chômage et le goût de l'aventure sont certainement des facteurs incitatifs, comme le sont également la propagande officielle et les chansons du 'soldat Lebrun" (*Histoire du Quebec contemporain*:138-9).

[49] The Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* included Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame de Paris* (1831) and *Les Misérables* (1862). Although la grosse femme and Édouard are reading Hugo's earlier novel, *Bug-Jargal* (1826), which was not specifically banned, Albertine reacts accusatorily. The entire bodies of works of other French authors, such as André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Émile Zola, were completely banned (see Bujanda, J. M. de).

[50] Gabrielle Jodoin's husband, Mastaï, is the other exception; he speaks favorably of their soon-to-be-born baby and surprises Gabrielle with gifts (theater tickets). His kindness is limited however; he brags about the theater in front of his sister-in-law, Germaine Lauzon, whose husband forbids her to go to the theater. This results in a *scène de ménage* after which Gabrielle refuses to accompany Mastaï to the theater.

[51] Tremblay describes Germaine's obesity as extreme in his earlier novel, *C't'à ton tour, Laura Cadieu* (1973). Laura's preoccupation with her own weight is emphasized from the very beginning of this novel where she is harassed on the street due to her size. In this novel, Germaine earns the same identifier as "la grosse femme" in *La Grosse Femme d'à côté est enceinte*; Laura admits: "Je l'appelle 'la grosse Lauzon,' elle, parce que c'est la seule qui vient icitte qui est plus grosse que moé" (76).

[52] Maurice Duplessis was Premier of Quebec from 1936-1939 and again from 1944 to 1959; Adélard Godbout was the Premier of Quebec from 1939-1944, and they were engaged in their own political battles as they competed in each election. Tremblay depicts both Duplessis and Godbout as arrogant and violent animals in his novel. In a confrontation, they are quick to fight: "Deux secondes et demie plus tard la bataille était engagée et le sang coulait déjà" (135)

[53] Gould cites Madeleine Gagnon in particular as being specifically resistant to being grouped together with the other feminist experimental writers (3).

[54] From "La Raison appropriée" in *Entre Raison et déraison*, p. 14.

[55] The participants of *La Nef des sorcières* include Marthe Blackburn, Marie-Claire Blais, Odette Gagnon, Luce Guilbeault, Pol Pelletier, and France Théoret.

[56] Cixous first outlined the idea of *écriture féminine* in "Le Rire de la Méduse" (*L'Arc* 1975). Monique Wittig's fictional works, such as *Les Guérillères*, embody the sort of "feminizing" of language associated with *écriture feminine*, which Wittig actually rejects in her essay entitled "The Point of View: Universal or Particular" (In *The Straight Mind* 1980): "That there is no 'feminine writing' must be said at the outset, and one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression" (59).

[57] The *Office de la langue française du Quebec* published an official guide to feminized job titles in 1991.

[58] This attribution is cited in Susanne Lotbinière-Harwood's *Re-belle et infidèle: La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin* (125).

[59] In one of many examples of textual *Mises en abymes* in Wittig's work is her use of "Elles" as a universal symbol for (hu)mankind. Wittig has criticized the English translation of *Les Guérillères* by David Le Vay (published in 1985) who translated "Elles" as "The Women," thereby negating Wittig's attempts to universalize the feminine pronoun.

[60] In *Entre Raison et déraison*, pp. 143-155.

[61] Nicole Brossard was a co-founder of *La Barre du jour* (1965-1977) and *La Nouvelle Barre du jour* (1977-1990), which had a decidedly more feminist project. Brossard and Théoret were both founders and contributors to *Têtes de pioches* (1976-79).

[62] Lalonde acknowledges the difficulties that the feminist movement has had in articulating a universally-accepted concept of motherhood but that in general, it seeks to valorize but redistribute evenly maternal responsibilities: "On cherche à articuler un projet de société *maternelle*, c'est-à-dire, à bien y penser, de société égalitaire et chaleureuse, ni maternaliste ni paternaliste mais appuyée sur les valeurs dites 'féministes' données en partage original aux deux sexes" (211 emphasis in original).

[63] This resentment over societal control over women's bodies is developed by a peer of Théoret's, Michèle Mailhot, in a novel called *Mort de l'araginée* (1972). In this novel, the protagonist finds herself a victim of a concentration camp where women are being directed into two groups: "stérilisation" and "insémination." Looking over her papers, the guard reads: "Femme, québécoise, catholique . . . .Vous êtes condamnée, me dit-il, trois fois condamnée" (45).

[64] In *Entre Raison et déraison*, pp. 75-77.

[65] In *Les Mots et les femmes* (Paris: Payot, 1979), Marina Yaguello considers slang and curse words as created by men with a purposeful intention of excluding women, and she mentions bars specifically as locations where women are excluded from discourse (pp. 34-6).

[66] Since the well-known publication of letters written by French women such as Madame de Stael and Madame de Sévigné, along with fictional works such as Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* in 18th-century France, the status of letter writing has persisted as being associated primarily with women.

[67] From "The Other Family Romance: Daughters and Fathers in Quebec Women Writers of the 1990s" in *Doing Gender: Franco-Canadian Women Writers of the 1990s*, ed. Paula Ruth Gilbert and Roseanna Dufault (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 2001): 169-85.

[68] Andrée Lévesque *(La Norme et les déviantes: des femmes au Quebec pendant l'entre-deux-guerres*) describes the history of the Hôpital de la Miséricorde in Montreal as having been founded for the purpose of concealing unwed mothers and "rehabilitating" them. Lévesque compares the treatment of the women as similar to inmates in a jail. During the 1930s and 1940s, the Hôpital was often overcrowded with pregnant, unmarried women, delivering on average 560 babies per year (101).

[69] *Le Corps à corps avec la mère* includes the keynote speech given by Irigaray and two interviews with Irigaray at a 1980 conference in Montreal on "Les femmes et la folie."

[70] Rich reminds her readers that the definition of matrophobia "is the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*" (235 emphasis in original).

[71] Agnant explains her decision to write in French instead of Creole: "Ma fonction n'est pas d'écrire uniquement pour un lectorat haïtien. Ce serait une bien grande prétention et cela équivaudrait au fait à me taire. Mon besoin d'écrire [. . .] doit se faire en français , par nécessité de réception. Je vis au Quebec" (Jurney 392).

[72] In Patrice Proulx's article on "Bearing Witness and Transmitting Memory in the Works of Marie-Célie Agnant," Proulx observes that, "Agnant, one of only a few Haitian women writers in Quebec, has yet to receive the same level of media recognition as her male counterparts," and suggests that this relative silence is especially troubling when one considers Agnant's devotion to revealing and re-telling stories of violence inflicted on Haitian men and women (35-6).

[73] See Catherine Mavrikakis's blog/website: www.catherinemavrikakis.com

[74] Bay City is located near Saginaw Bay but at the juncture of two major highways and is approximately 120 miles north of Detroit. (*City of Bay City, Michigan*. Web. 7 May 2012 (http://www.baycitymi.org).

[75] In this article, Lyngaas compares *Le Livre d'Emma* to *Un Alligator Nommé Rosa* (2007), Agnant's novel set against the regime of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (who was President of Haiti from 1957 until his death in 1971).

[76] In an interview, Agnant observes that even Haitian authors have avoided writing about the period of slavery in Haiti's past: "C'est une période tabou" (cited in Jurney 388).

[77] *The Agronomist*, a documentary about Jean Dominique, who ran Haiti's independent radio station, "Radio Haiti-Inter," during the Duvalier regime, recalls a film festival during which Dominique screened N*uit et Brouillard (*1955), a documentary about the Holocaust's concentration camps. Dominique observes, "Everyone realized that Auschwitz was Fort Dimanche. And the police reacted very badly." (Fort Dimanche was the prison maintained under the Duvalier regime).

[78] Annie Ernaux's *L'Évenément* (Gallimard 2000) is a memoir in which the author recalls her own (life-threatening and illegal) abortion in 1960s France.

[79] Delvaux also mentions *À Ce Soir* by Laure Adler (1991), in which the author recounts the death of her nine month old baby, and *Philippe* by Camille Laurens (1995), an auto-fictive account of the author's son who died at birth.

[80] Peggy McIntosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack" is considered one of the first (and best-known) theorizations on white privilege (which in turn can lead to guilt). McIntosh argues for an acknowledgement of the unspoken privilege that comes with being white: "It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all" (12).

[81] Mavrikakis's novel, *Les Derniers jours de Smokey Nelson* (Héliotrope 2011) addresses the themes of capital punishment and racism in the United States.

[82] An example of this is *Time* magazine's May 21, 2012 cover depicting a (young, white, conventionally attractive) mother breastfeeding her three-year old son. The purpose of this magazine cover seems solely to provoke, and the sheer number of reactions and critiques online and in print show the success of this intention. The increasing number of restrictions placed upon women's reproductive rights in the United States in recent years (referred to by some as the "war on women") reinforce that women's roles as (prospective) parents remains heavily moderated. A French example of the ongoing debates regarding how women mother is philosopher Elisabeth Bandinter's controversial *Le Conflit: la femme et la mère* (2010) in which Badinter argues against certain methods of parenting (attachent-parenting, for example) by claiming that doting on children too much harms women's professional and personal identities.

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