

Florence Ramond Journey and Karen McPherson, eds.
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Divided into two parts, “Defining the Mother” and “Defining the Aging Self,” *Women's Lives in Contemporary French and Francophone Literature* offers a thorough critique of literary representations of motherhood and aging, with a particular emphasis on how what had previously been an unmentionable topic moved to the forefront of discussion. Editors Journey and McPherson carefully set the stage for the collection by explaining how topics that had once been unacceptable to broach became acceptable in the period from the close of the 20th century to the dawn of the 21st century:

By the end of the twentieth century, certain aspects of women's lives such as motherhood and mother-daughter relationships had found a comfortable place in the critical discourse and were already being explored and theorized in exciting ways. Topics like female coming-of-age and women's aging were also beginning to gain critical attention, while others relevant to women's lives, such as the intentional refusal of motherhood, remained largely unaddressed. The first decade of the twenty-first century then saw a steep increase in the publication of studies of some of the less discussed and largely undertheorized topics: women began writing in much greater depth and detail about formerly taboo topics such as rape, incest, prostitution, and infanticide. Among subjects increasingly evident in women's writings were the experiences of women “post-maternity” and the implications of a woman's decision *not* to have children. (VI-VII)

The range of works analyzed, representing an equally wide range of authors (Maryse Condé, Hélène Cixous, Zahia Rahmani, Linda Lê, Pierrette Fleutieux, and Michèle Sarde), is noteworthy. This makes for the perfect course template to inspire faculty to develop a new course or infuse new content into an existing course or even to galvanize

a graduate student to explore different approaches and angles in his/her doctoral research. Part I, "Defining the Mother," is comprised of the following six articles: "Aban-donner: The Maternal in *Le jour où je n'étais pas là*" (Laurie Corbin); "The Accidental Author: Motherhood, Woundability, and Writing in Maryse Condé's *La vie sans fards*" (Nicole Simek); "Childless Mothers: Personal Perspectives from Francophone Women Writers" (Alison Rice); "If you don't have children, you must be...': Linda Lê's *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas* and Voluntary Non-Motherhood" (Julie Rodgers); "Linda Lê's Antigonal Refusal of Motherhood" (Gillian Ni Cheallaigh); and, "Free at Last: Coming to Terms with the Mother in the Woman in *La noce d'Anna* by Nathacha Appanah" (Florence Ramond Journey). Part II, "Defining the Aging Self," consists of four articles: "*La dernière adresse*: Possessions, Dispossession and the Preservation of Memory" (Jean Anderson); "Redefining the Self: Explorations of Aging in Michèle Sarde's *Constance et la cinquantaine* and Nancy Huston's *Dolce agonia*" (Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx); "A Daughter No More: (National) Identity and the Adult Orphan in *Loin de mon père* by Véronique Tadjo" (Amy Baram Reid); and, "Writing the Mother Immortal: Cixous and Dupré" (Karen McPherson).

Particularly striking in the analyses of autobiographical writing by contemporary French and francophone women is the attention given to how a woman identifies herself and how her role in society is defined and shaped. For example, when analyzing Linda Lê's *À l'enfant que je n'aurai pas*, published by Nil Editions as part of the special "Les affranchis" collection, Julie Rodgers explains:

The series calls upon writers to produce a letter inspired by a deeply affective moment or experience in their own lives about which they have never written before. In the case of Lê, her addressee is the child that she chose not to conceive, thus bypassing what contemporary society continues to posit as one of the most "pivotal" and "natural" stages of womanhood. Lê's letter is composed mostly in the past conditional as the author imagines both what her child would have been (physically and personality-wise) and how she would have behaved as a mother, had she decided to have a child. Interestingly, as the letter draws to a close, the past conditional shifts into the present tense, suggesting that although this child has not been born and will not be born (as outlined by the use of the future in the text of the text), he/she is firmly extant in the author's imagination. (47)

Similarly, on the topic of aging, Amy Baram Reid examines the uneasy period that arises after the death of one's parents and one must adjust to being an "adult orphan":

When Nina, the protagonist of Véronique Tadjo's autobiographically inspired novel *Loin de mon père* (2010) returns to Côte d'Ivoire for her

father's funeral, she is confronted by a most uncertain landscape. The country where she was raised has been scarred, rendered almost unrecognizable by years of political conflict, and her immediate ties to her homeland have been severed by her father's death. The identity crisis that results is underscored at the very start of the novel when an immigration officer, trying to establish a personal connection to Nina, asks the question she had been hoping to avoid, the one she no longer knew how to answer: "Vous êtes la fille du docteur Kouadio Yao?" (17). Having lost first her mother and now her father, she is a daughter no more. So who is she? (121)

In sum, Journey and McPherson have done an excellent job of editing and assembling a fine collection of articles that further the important discussion surrounding the history and evolution of how women's lives are portrayed and depicted in French and Francophone literature.