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**Self-making in autobiographical narratives: how women artists
negotiate gender and creative roles through domestic spaces**

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PhD Thesis

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I Morganne Conti hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

26 July 2018

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Abstract

This thesis explores how women artists articulate their subjectivity through autobiographical writings such as memoirs, diaries, and *romans à clef*. It begins by acknowledging the difficulties many women artists experience in asserting their identity as artists. In traditional and masculinist ways of understanding art, creativity is assumed to involve an act of transcendence from material circumstances and everyday life. For many women artists such acts of transcendence are not possible. By writing about their own lives, women artists give themselves space to negotiate and confront myths and institutionalised values about art and to produce counter-institutional histories.

In the thesis I explore how three women artists, Dorothea Tanning, Leonora Carrington, and Faith Ringgold, write about their lives and art. I note how each of these artists place their art not in studios set aside from everyday life but in domestic spaces. Indeed, they each offer vivid accounts of domestic spaces including rooms and furniture. My method of reading is to follow these artists through spaces, from room to room, into and outside of houses. Domestic spaces are also filled by intimate relationships; women artists, in writing about art also write about their roles within these relationships. I explore how women artists are called upon to perform certain roles that risk distancing them from their lives as artists. Whether they fulfil these roles or not, I argue that the rationale they provide for the roles they take up is how they assert their creative identities.

By exploring how women artists write about art, this thesis demonstrates how art can be created *given* the restrictions of physical environments, social norms and gendered expectations. Throughout, the thesis engages with classic feminist critiques of domesticity and recent queer reflections on the subject. It demonstrates how creativity can come from the very struggle to make room.

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Introduction

This thesis explores how women artists represent themselves as artists in memoirs and autobiographical writings from the middle of the twentieth to the beginning of the twenty-first century. I understand autobiographical writings as projects of self-making through which women artists present and negotiate the complexities that emerge in their everyday lives as both women and artists. The project initially sprang from the realisation that a significant number of women artists hesitate to define themselves as artists, sometimes even after decades of artistic production. My research is preoccupied with how such doubts relate to ongoing sexist and racist understandings of artistic identity as well as expectations about women's roles and femininity. In particular, I focus on experiences which unfold in the domestic space, for it is here that creative selves cohabit uncomfortably with gendered figures, competing for women artists' attention and energy.

Conditions of access to the arts improved for women in the last century, opening up possibilities that had been rare before. However, in this project, I build on feminist philosopher Christine Battersby's argument that, historically, women have had 'to confront... [a common] rhetoric of social exclusion every time they tried to create' (1989, p.11). In other words, women artists have had to face material and symbolic discrimination articulated through language, belief and exclusionary social practices – many of which endure in the present. In response, through this project I ask how autobiographical writings may function as a site where women artists engage with and challenge gender rhetoric that continues to work against non-male, non-white and non-heterosexual artists.

¹ The concept through which I approach images of artistic identity and stereotypical women's roles in the domestic is the notion of figures. Specifically, I borrow the concept from Donna Haraway, who defines figures as verbal or visual images whose existence and circulation constitute meanings and bring into existence forms of knowledge about the world that surrounds us (1997, p. 11). Haraway's core argument is that figures might be conceptual, but they are present as a material reality insofar as we interpret objects, situations and people through them.

Deconstructive and poststructuralist perspectives in Feminist Art History have shown that sexist rhetoric against women artists is especially prominent in the gendering of Art History. Among such strategies of discrimination, this thesis is concerned with the cult of the individual artist, great artist or genius. I maintain that the mythical figure of the artist is one of the most effective devices through which women have been excluded from creative identity because this figure has traditionally been portrayed as a man. Accordingly, this research aims to account for how the artist figure becomes manifest in women artists' lives in ways that might make it complex for them to fully embrace artistic identity. However, although this thesis is involved in exploring discrimination, I also show how women artists' refusal to be excluded from the category of artist is key to reimagining and crafting creative subjectivities.

Overall this research performs two main tasks. On the one hand, I seek to identify moments of conflict in women artists' sense of themselves as artists. At the same time, I explore how the writings I analyse can also operate as instruments through which the authors disrupt enduring beliefs of what it is to be an artist. My goal is to show how, through these texts, women artists are able to redefine *artist* also as *woman* by creating a picture of their own lives in their own terms. In that sense, I am interested here in how autobiographical writings engender different ways to be an artist: a series of alternative figurations, which help its authors go on living.

Walking out of a gallery as a path into the thesis: research questions and feminist politics

To introduce this thesis is also to explain how I came to be interested in the figure of the woman artist. The question of how women artists feel about embodying the figure of artist – whether they present and even see themselves as artists or not – can be understood as both a personal and an institutional question. If familiar figures materialise ideals that represent dominant or normative meanings in society, what they signify is also experienced privately, in the domain of individual lives. I too came to the question of the woman artist for both personal and institutional reasons. In a way, I once had, or had tried to, see myself in her. But I had failed. However, this

failure pushed me to look beyond my own story. I had a burgeoning sense that something more than personal choice had steered me into a different path when I realised that the effort I had invested for years in this pursuit had almost vanished. In an effort to understand this puzzle, I moved on to explore the wider context of this story, the institutions involved and the role they play in shaping our existence. Nevertheless, I would not have come to the question of institutions if the woman artist had not begun as my own concern. Hence, I want to start by locating myself in the story of this thesis, as I stood in a gallery over nine years ago.

There were large grey canvases. There were grey canvases with splashes of colour, splashes of me, words that spoke of me. I looked up and to the left, through the long corridor-shaped gallery, four, five, large grey canvases. I turned my head back, and dropped my eyes to the floor. Behind, to my left, I could hear someone was coming to speak to me. I braced myself. I brace myself again as I try to explain or even figure out where this project might have started. Before the literature searches and the cramps in my shoulders from long hours writing at a desk, this project was something I felt before it was something I could define. It seems to already have been present in some memories, like in that moment of looking at the canvases.

I am not an artist. I never called myself an artist. But for over ten years, I gave every spare second of my time to art. I thought about art. I read about art. I made art. When I had the opportunity, I turned art into the complete centre of my life and started studying Fine Art at university. In the five years that followed, I obsessively produced more drawings, installations, paintings and videos that I can now count or remember, all accumulating in an unused room where eventually I lost sight of the floor. Nothing brought me more pleasure than imagining and creating things, artworks. Class after class, I achieved great results. Yet class after class I was made to feel that my work lacked *soul*. I was dextrous, had good technical mastery, interesting ideas, but, seemingly, no soul.

Back then I spent a great deal of my time with a male colleague with whom I shared a similar sensibility. He had a marked tendency for self-romanticising, and, although I suspect not deliberately, he very consistently applied himself to embodying the

tortured artist stereotype. Like everyone in my social circle, I admired him. While I could not put my finger on what it was, he had something that I did not. I went through my degree grappling with personal insecurities and public rejections. No professor or exhibition jury told me that there was something wrong with my work. Indeed, they nodded. They looked at it. It was good. It was, okay. All the while, I sat through numerous conversations where my friend was exalted and praised. He was envied. He was chosen for competitions and international exhibitions. Even my grandmother got in the habit of saying 'He is an artist' [Not my emphasis]. Perhaps I flinched – I don't know, but I heard it. It did not make me unhappy. Perhaps I agreed. Maybe I did not yet understand.

In my fourth year, my friend and I had grown distant. To my utter surprise when attending the opening for a solo exhibition he had been working on, I found myself to be the subject of the show. It was not my portrait on the walls, not my body, but my whole self. I was everywhere around me, outside myself. Large grey looming canvases with touches of colour froze me to the spot. The confusion I felt at that moment is impossible to convey. Should I have felt flattered? Was that meant to be some sort of praise? I was in shock, standing in front of a painting when a professor who had been an intellectual mentor for my feminist work approached and said to me: 'I didn't know you had been in a relationship with x' and proceeded to buy the painting. I was mortified. I was going to be hung in his living room. I cried. I might never have felt I was an artist, but at that moment, I was denied myself as a person. Other incidents progressively eroded my desire to create, but the things I heard, that one relationship and episode epitomise my inability to think of myself as an artist. I obtained the second highest grade of my degree in a cohort of nearly three hundred students. It seemed to mean nothing. After my last project, I packed up my tools, art supplies and materials. I have never reopened the boxes since. As I write at my desk now, those boxes still sit next to me. They force their silent and obtrusive presence upon me. Sometimes someone asks me: 'what happened to you? You used to be an artist.' I feel ashamed. I smile, and I reply: 'no... I was never really an artist.'

The first time I wrote this story, I said that I was content with the path I had taken. I had stopped producing art but I was perfectly satisfied with my life, although puzzled

by my ability to give up so easily something I had loved. It now makes me sad to think about it. Of course, there are multiple reasons why I personally did not pursue an artistic career. I know that having grown up in a working-class household with a mother struggling to make ends meet, I was terrified of the financial precarity that too often accompanies a creative life. However, that heavy feeling, that shame I experience when I am forced to reflect on my proximity to a role I find wonderful, tells me that my desire for creativity was always mitigated by something else that was also a part of me. A few days ago, a friend told me that she *had* to make time for art because it was precious, and yet it was ‘so easy to stop doing it.’ My research is not about the decision to become an artist but about what happens when one does make this decision. What is it like for women to live with the decision to be an artist? Throughout the years that led into this thesis and ever since I started, I have stumbled across numerous accounts of recognised women artists also doubting their right to be artists. These encounters with a pattern of ambivalence have driven my motivation to pursue this study. They have made me realise how common this uncertainty is.

In 2012 I was at the Barbican Centre for the screening of Auerbach’s documentary *Paula Rego: Telling Tales* (2009). In finishing, Rego came on stage for a Q&A, and at one point stated: ‘I am not an artist. I do drawings.’ If that woman who produced extraordinary artworks and had a career of over sixty years behind her could not see herself as an artist, then, who could? These experiences, these events, made me ask: what is it about being a woman that might make it a challenge to assert oneself as an artist? What difficulties do women go through when they choose to live their lives as artists? Why is it that it seems so ‘easy’ for women to give up art when it also appears to be so meaningful to them? These are the questions that inspire and frame this project. They have moved this research forward from the start as I tried to understand why numerous women, time and again, have struggled and continue to struggle with the role of artist, even when they might have solid creative careers.

There are difficulties in doing research on a subject to which I am so personally close. Yet my interest in this topic and my own emotional ambivalence are at the core of where this project originates. To make this information explicit is politically and

ethically necessary, in order to account for the ways and means of my research. As Adrienne Rich argues, by marking my 'place on the map' I seek to indicate the location which has shaped 'my ways of seeing and my ideas of who and what was important' (1984, p.220). My vision is carved by the cultural politics that, as a woman, I have had to confront, but also by the privileges that as a white person, I have benefited from, including in the art world. Thus, as Rich explains, to locate oneself is about grounding the authority we hope to speak from, but also about recognising the limits of that knowledge – limits for which we need to take responsibility (p.119). In this project, I will speak about women whom I might have something in common with, but also about women who articulate struggles profoundly different from mine, and whom I ought to listen to and try to learn from. Hence, as Rich states: 'I need to move outward from the base and centre of my own feelings, but with a corrective sense that my feelings are not *the* center of feminism' (p.231).

The questions that drive this research derive from a sense of awareness that women's lack of ease with their artistic selves has something to tell us about women's relation to the art world. When women express restlessness, anxiety, or discomfort in identifying as artists, we can ask what contributes to these feelings. Stories like the ones I recount above, like the ones I will explore throughout this project, connect that aching uncertainty with a perceived lack of legitimacy. It is not illegitimate for women to occupy the role of artist. And yet, something in the world around them has led many women to feel that it is.

As I explore in more depth in the following chapters, the discomfort women artists articulate might be seen as a response to what feminist sociologist Nirmal Puwar has termed the 'somatic norm': an unstated gendered and racialised norm which regulates 'whose bodies' can occupy influential cultural roles. According to Puwar, the function of the norm is to sustain institutionalised privilege, in particular that of white men who are tacitly perceived as the ideal type (2004, p.8). And therefore, when women come *excessively* close to these positions, they are made to feel uncomfortable because they threaten the status quo (p.8). But as with most unspoken rules, the presence of a norm is sometimes not perceived but for its effects. A barrier might materialise as a feeling, excluding women but disavowing its

boundaries. Women can feel that they do not belong in the art world because, in some way, they experience their artistic selves differently. My concern is to understand how a sense of being inadequate or uneasy shapes how women occupy art and how art remains occupied. Puwar speaks from the present in which she writes, which is also my present. But the norms of which she speaks are the noxious legacy of the structures, values, and social systems from the previous century, and sometimes further. Throughout the different chapters in this thesis, I will be engaged with feminist work on feeling and sensation², and feminist and queer critiques of women's traditional gender roles to show how a sense, an impression, can have a history.

So as to explore and develop an understanding of the issues women have had to address on an ordinary basis in their life as artists, this project delves into autobiographical writings. Memoirs, diaries and personal texts are a medium through which women artists have thought through and documented the difficulties, rewards and strategies they employ to make sense of and perform their artistic identity and other roles they embody. Personal life writing has the ability to reflect the historical moment, the mores and traditions that surround it, and the immediate familial and domestic context of its authors. Through a selection of three women artists' writings, or what might be called case studies, I explore in depth, I aim to highlight patterns that are not unique to the artists represented in the project. These chapters are organised around: Dorothea Tanning's *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001), Leonora Carrington's surrealist short stories from *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (1989a) and *The Seventh Horse & Other Tales* (1989b) and Faith Ringgold's *We flew Over the Bridge* (1995). Though there are differences among them, these three projects of self-writing represent recurring problems in women artists' narratives, as

² Much of my way of thinking about how women artists negotiate gendered roles and difficulties in relation to their artistic identity has been shaped by feminist scholarship on emotion and feeling, including: Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004) and *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Arlie Hochschild's *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983), Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Ann Cvetkovich's *Depression: A Public Feeling* (2012) and Alison Jaggar's 'Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology' (1996). I touch on ideas from these texts in Chapter Two: methodology. But overall, I will be introducing this body of work more consistently through my reading of the different artists' autobiographical writings in the other chapters.

well as the need to disentangle and challenge the exclusionary system of value through which these problems emerge.

As a piece of interdisciplinary research, the project is located within a tradition of Women and Feminist Studies in the humanities, but it is not fully contained by this discipline or categories. It draws on elements from Gender Studies, Feminist Art History and Literary Studies. Its boundaries are blurry. It is a study about artists but not about art. It draws on texts but focuses on the authors' self-representation as visual artists, rather than as writers. It talks about lives while being aware that the authors take creative liberties in their narratives. It employs notions derived from the social sciences to make sense of how gender and sexual identity are represented, how they connect to other texts, other women, and creates communities through these connections. Altogether, it is a project where I interpret and analyse three sets of texts which are sometimes inconsistent, contradictory, messy. They are complex projects of self-representation, such as the lives of those who wrote them. And yet, amidst the layers, there are experiences in these writings that, as I show by tracing parallels, echo those of other women artists.

In the following section I place my research subject into its historical context. I provide an overview of women's role as artists in the twentieth century and address the changing status of creative women during this period. This discussion is important because it outlines how the new possibilities and definitions women artists acquired in this period have shaped my understanding of their lives and concerns.

Historical background and developments: women's roles and artistic identity

The twentieth century marks a radical turning point regarding women's access to the art world and education. From the late nineteenth century, there is a significant increase of women in the art academies, and although substantially less recognised, they are present in most artistic movements. Besides the slow but significant political change brought about by the early feminist movement, some scholars have attributed this growth in participation to the changing character of art.

For example, though they acknowledge sexual difference and discrimination, feminist art historians Anne Wagner (1998) and Susan Suleiman (2012) respectively see opportunities for women artists to develop their careers and also criticise patriarchal dynamics within the disruptive and anti-establishment logic of avant-garde movements. The extent to which women artists participating in these movements can be seen as subversive, however, has been highly contested in other branches of feminist art history, where critics such as Tamar Garb portray Modernism's inherent sexism as absolute, erasing ideological challenges in its ability to 'devour' formal innovations (1986, p.132). In this spirit, feminist critics – who as I will detail in more depth in my Literature Review, have often been labelled second-generation – such as Griselda Pollock (1988/2003), have sought to analyse women's roles in turn of the century movements by deconstructing the underlying social and ideological structures. But no matter the reasons for this change, artistic, social or otherwise, the twentieth century is the site of expanding practical gains for women artists – a change which peaks during the development of the feminist art movement, beginning in the mid-1960s predominantly in the United States, Britain, and parts of Europe.

Emerging in connection to the wider feminist movement in the U.S., the feminist art movement took hold of both the East and the West coasts, spreading quickly with the fury and hope for political change that characterised the era³. Women artists began gathering and organising to protest their lack of representation in art institutions such as the Whitney Museum of American Art (1970) and New York's Museum of Modern Art (1972). In California, Judy Chicago, joined later by Miriam Schapiro, created the first feminist art programs at Fresno State College (1970) and subsequently at California Institute for the Arts (1971). Its outcome, the famous 'Womanhouse', where artists drew on consciousness raising techniques to create a collaborative installation, remains one of the best-known collective projects in the

³ For more detailed accounts of the events and developments of the feminist art movement see: Gouma-Peterson, T., & Mathews, P. (1987). *The Feminist Critique of Art History*. *The Art Bulletin*, 69(3), 326-357; and Broude, N. & Garrard, M. (1996). *The Power of Feminist Art: The American Movement of the 1970s. History and Impact*, New York: H.N. Abrams

history of art and feminist activism⁴. In the span of three years, starting in 1969, a series of feminist organisations appeared in New York: the Woman Artists in Revolution (WAR), the Ad Hoc Committee of Women Artists (led by Lucy Lippard) and Women Artists in the Arts (WIA). Black women artists similarly organised to denounce their exclusion both as women and as Black⁵ artists. In 1971, a formal Black feminist collective came out of the exceptionally successful exhibition ‘Where We At: Black Women Artists’ (WWA). Cooperative art galleries run by women and specifically oriented to promote women’s art, such as the A.I.R. Gallery (1972), opened and multiple feminist publications saw the light, including: the ‘Woman Artist’s Newsletter’ (1975), ‘Chrysalis: A Magazine of Women’s Culture’ (1977), ‘Heresies’ (1977) and ‘Woman’s Art Journal’ (1980). The sixties and seventies were a time of incessant feminist activity, with women’s groups and collectives openly raising political, social and aesthetic issues in the arts – which ranged from equal participation and value, through feminine aesthetics and female sensibility, to critiques of women’s stereotypes and representation.

The development of the feminist art movement together with the wider presence of women in the arts in general reinvigorated the question of women’s role in the art world. Although their position still had to be defined, nuanced and problematised, women had a new role to play beyond those of muse or model they had been held to in the past. Whether women artists had taken part in feminist organising or not, the ongoing ideological battle promoted the notion that women could now more easily think of themselves as artists – if not in practice, at least in theory. Although it required financial and social privileges, and no small amount of resilience, being an artist became an option to an extent that did not exist until then.

⁴ Judy Chicago writes about her experiences and difficulties when setting up the ‘Feminist Art Program’ in both Fresno and Los Angeles in her first autobiography: *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975/1982).

⁵ Throughout this thesis I capitalise Black when referring to Black women, men, or political collectives. By capitalising Black, I seek to follow in the critical tradition established by Black feminist scholars such as Audre Lorde and Angela Davis.

However, this possibility did not automatically dislodge old cultural narratives and dominant images of women in idealised roles such as those of mother and wife, nor did it displace their central presence in the domestic sphere.

It matters to this project that such idealised gender figures still prevailed during this period because, as I show throughout the thesis, their existence influenced how women were perceived, what was expected from them, and how they understood themselves. Furthermore, these figures are keenly present in the domestic sphere, where, because of financial conditions or tradition, numerous women artists' lives have unfolded. Accordingly, in her research on modernism and women artists, art historian Anne Wagner traces these images back to their origin. She argues that twentieth century women inherited the 'Victorian model of respectable womanhood' whereby woman's social identity is shaped by a series of traditional types she must embody (1998, p.7). What is most striking to Wagner, however, is not that these types define a particular personality, but rather, the expectation that women ought to occupy multiple positions and 'no strain or contradiction is meant to be visible between the roles' (p.7). In other terms, women ought to shift comfortably between domestic and familial responsibilities, whilst potentially also developing their artistic identity and practice without feeling overwhelmed or conflicted by time or energy constraints.

For Wagner, occupying multiple positions is a complex requirement paradigmatic of women's condition during this period. She argues that throughout the century, gendered demands posed impossible and competing expectations on women, which engendered contradictions and a typical sense of disjunction between 'being a woman' and 'being an artist' (1998, p.8). Like Wagner's, my research promptly led me to the argument that irreconcilable gendered domestic and familial demands are frequently part of women's everyday reality. Furthermore, as I have come across more and more accounts of women artist's lives throughout the years of this PhD, I have increasingly observed how differing expectations frequently pull women into opposite directions.

Examples of women artists split between ideals of womanhood and artistic self, such as the ones Wagner builds on – in her case, Eva Hesse, Lee Krasner and Georgia O’Keeffe – abound (1998). Nonetheless, as Christine Battersby (1989, 2013), June Wayne (1973), Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker (1981/2013) argue, scholars as much as women artists have had to contend with myths of universal artistic greatness and genius, which blur the source of these difficulties. Not only have these myths had an impact on the work of those who might wish to discredit women artists, they have often also influenced scholars who want to prove their worth. For instance, the myth is present in feminist art historian Cindy Nemser’s paradigmatic collection of interviews with contemporary women artists, where the author is motivated by a laudable desire to reclaim greatness for women artists (1975/1995). However, her vehement belief in the universality of genius leads her to disregard the complexities her interviewees articulate. Through her insistence that women can have everything, Nemser does not consider how other taxing positions the women she interviews embody come to interfere with their ability to embrace creative life. As a result, through her claim that women’s and men’s art is absolutely equal, Nemser upholds a common argument which brushes aside the difficulties that elements such as family life, romantic love and domesticity might trigger.

Nemser’s position is representative of the first feminist approaches that sought to assert the value of women’s art in a patriarchal world. But as it may have been expected due to her uncritical stance, her book of interviews was challenged by large sections of the feminist community immediately after publication. Carol Duncan’s ‘When Greatness is a Box of Wheaties’ encapsulates the core of these critiques (1975/1993). In her essay, Duncan points out that Nemser has failed to interrogate the gendered and historical values on which the notion of greatness is built. She has neglected to reflect on what I referred to earlier in Nirmal Puwar’s terms as the ‘somatic norm,’ the unstated masculine ideal on which the figure of the artist is based (2004, p.8). As a result, Duncan argues, Nemser is unable to recognise how women might have ‘trouble identifying with the role of professional artist’ or that their art might reflect experiences from their lives as women (1993, p.127).

In the following two decades, Duncan's argument about the gendered character of greatness and the artistic self would become one of the most well-known critiques brought about by feminist art history. It is an argument crucial to this project for it has shaped how I interpret women artists' references and relationship to creative subjectivity. However, it is also extremely relevant that the critique did not in fact directly translate into practice. The ideological conflict between Carol Duncan and Cindy Nemser is reflective of the division that separates feminist criticism from a material reality still very much organised around discriminating ideals of creative identity.

The lack of structural change that ensued from the debate between Duncan and Nemser helps me bring back into focus the problem Anne Wagner outlines in her work (1998, p.8). The fact that the notion of artist has continued to circulate widely unchallenged throughout the last century is, from my perspective in this thesis, what has made it most complex to account for women artists' problems to embody this role. At the same time, the resilience of this concept is part of what makes research into women artists' lives all the more relevant. Without an understanding of gender dynamics, the sense of disjunction that according to Wagner women artists experience might seem like a personal issue, rather than a seemingly logical consequence of inheriting competing ideals of womanhood and creativity. Moreover, even in those cases where women do not experience a sense of disjunction – and from my study I can say that not all women artists do – gender dynamics associated with particular roles still matter. They matter because roles and figures, whether creative, familial, or domestic, impose practical demands that can compete with each other no matter how women artists perceive themselves.

Following the tradition Carol Duncan's critique inaugurates, my interpretation of women artists' narratives starts with and builds on feminist art historians' analysis of how cultural discourses and social practices have determined artistic identity in the West, conceptually and materially. From there the thesis goes on to explore how women articulate in their personal writings the relationship between these myths and traditional gender roles. Pioneering feminist art historian Linda Nochlin argued in an interview with Maura Reilly that the concept of artistic greatness is no longer

relevant in a world as plural as ours (2015). The same could be said of the term genius. But while our world may have become more layered and complicated, it is still characterised by rampant sexism and the fact that we live with the residue of these concepts. Greatness is still in use in art and history textbooks, artists' monographs and exhibition catalogues. Greatness lives on in people's consciousness as they enter an art class, a museum or a gallery, where the word, heavy with unacknowledged gender and racial biases, is casually dropped in passing but meaningful comments. The persistence of this term and others alike make it relevant to enquire how implicit expectations about what an artist is – the definition of artist – have weighed on women artists' interpretation of their lives. Furthermore, these considerations are particularly significant when looking back at the twentieth century, for it is a period which encompassed profound changes for women, including that of challenging discrimination in the art world.

In the next section, I highlight the significance of autobiographical writing as a functional medium of expression and show how it offers an original way to explore women's existence and self-understanding as artists. To this end, I begin with a brief history of women artists' autobiographical writings and memoirs. I map the development of this genre as a body of work with shared characteristics, and then proceed to explain how my examples represent some of the most prevalent issues that permeate these writings, whilst outlining the structure of the thesis.

Women artists' autobiographical writings and memoirs: selection and structure

The new professional possibilities women artists acquired throughout the twentieth century fulfilled a metaphorical *cliché*. Feminist politics and women's growing presence in creative spaces breached the boundaries of a traditionally male institution. They opened a door into the art world. But once inside, women had to negotiate how to occupy their position as artists as they faced established beliefs and preconceptions. In light of these difficulties, I propose that women artists' large number of published autobiographical writings operate as a response to the everyday challenges of living and understanding themselves as artists.

Publishing History

The majority of currently published autobiographical writings of this type portray the lives of women artists from around the 1920s or 1930s until the present. However, in line with the crystallisation of the feminist movement, women artists' autobiographical writing only becomes established as genre in the late 1970s and 1980s. We see then the emergence of classics such as Judy Chicago's *Through the Flower: My Struggle as a Woman Artist* (1975) or Kate Millet's *Flying* (1974/2000), which were brought into the market by famous publishers, respectively, Anchor and Random House – and would both go through multiple reprints and re-editions by different editorial houses in the following two decades. In the 1980s, growing feminist publishers such as Virago carried on with the project, issuing books such as Leonora Carrington's *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (1989a) and *The Seventh Horse & Other Tales* (1989b), as well as rediscovered women artists' autobiographies from the previous century, *The Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff* (1985), edited by Griselda Pollock, and *The Memoirs of Élisabeth Vigée Le Brun* (1989), published by Camden Press. Anne Truitt's diaries (1982, 1986, 1996) are an interesting case from this period as they were not advertised as feminist texts but the alleged accuracy with which they depicted women artists' reality made them incredibly popular. Indeed, Truitt's diaries were published by Penguin and the first two volumes went through various reprints. Art publishers and smaller companies also joined the trend of publishing women artists: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's first edition of *Dictee* (1982) was published by Tanam Press, Elenor Antin's *Being Antinova* (1983) by Astro Artz, and *I Shock Myself: The Autobiography of Beatrice Wood* (1985) by Chronicle Books. Beyond the United States and Britain, women artists' memoirs and writings also saw the light. For instance, Unica Zürn's *The Man of Jasmin* (*Der Mann im Jasmin*, 1971) was published for the first time in Germany, Tove Jansson's *Sculptor's Daughter: A Childhood Memoir* (*Bildhuggarens Dotter*, 1968) in Sweden, and five of Emily Carr's multiple volume autobiography came out in Canada between 1986 and 1988.

During the early 1990s, perhaps echoing the backlash against feminist politics, hardly any women artists' memoirs were published. There were exceptions, for example Karen Finley's *Shook Treatment* (1990). And feminist publishers such as The Women's

Press and Third Women's Press reissued a few popular texts such as Judy Chicago's autobiography or Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee*. But women artists' autobiographical writings only begin reappearing more consistently on the literary market in the second half of the decade, when we can find texts such as *We Flew over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995) published by Little, Brown Book Group, Paula Modersohn-Becker's *The Letter and Journals* (1998) by Northwestern University Press, and Niki De Saint Phalle's *Traces: Remembering 1930 – 1949* (1999) from Editions Acatos. However, the pace truly picks up again from the beginning of twenty-first century, when interest by publishers and readers appears to blossom. A long list of books have made it to the shelves since the early 2000s: Marina Abramović's *Walk Through Walls: A Memoir* (2016), Eleanor Antin's *Conversations with Stalin* (2013) and *An Artist's Life: By Eleanora Antinova* (2016), Claude Cahun's *Disavowals: Or Cancelled Confessions* (2008), Leonora Carrington's *Down Below* (2017) and *The Debutante and Other Stories* (2017), Niki De Saint Phalle's *Harry and Me: The Family Years* (2006), Tracey Emin's *Strangeland* (2006), Jacqueline Fahey's *Something for the Birds* (2006) and *Before I forget* (2012), Eva Hesse's *Diaries: 1955-1970* (2016), Frida Kahlo's *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-portrait* (2006), Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Net* (2013), Sally Mann's *Hold Still: A Memoir with Photographs* (2015), Georgia O'Keeffe's correspondence with Maria Chabot (2003) and with Alfred Stieglitz (2011), Yvonne Rainer's *Feelings Are Facts: A Life* (2013), Charlotte Salomon's *Life or Theatre?* (2017), Dorothea Tanning's *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001), and numerous others.

There is not a rule about where these books appear. Many have been published in the United States but not wide recognition for a significant number of them come from university presses. These kinds of publications are projects of small reach, often pushed forward by scholars or editors passionate about a particular artist. Art publishers such as Taschen, Hatje Cantz, and Tate are responsible for distributing a number of autobiographical texts written by internationally recognised artists, like Kusama's (2013) or Louise Bourgeois' (1998). And a very small number of them, the most famous ones, have been published by large or medium companies. For example, Abramovic's memoir (2016) was issued by Penguin, Emin's (2006) is from Sceptre, and Chris Kraus' recently very popular *I Love Dick* (2016) is from Serpent's Tail. The

rest of these texts are the product of small companies that have taken the risk of publishing lesser known but equally or even more fascinating artists.

Reflections on Genre

Many women artists' autobiographical writings have gone out of print throughout the years but have later been republished, which indicates that there is small but consistently engaged audience for these narratives. But aside from the public, what interests me most about these publications is that an extensive number of them were written in the last century. The publishing history of autobiographical manuscripts suggests the existence of a need for women to articulate themselves as artists.

Women artists' concerted effort to write themselves into existence is what leads me to interpret their writing as a mode of answering back all forms of institutionalised difficulties they encountered even as opportunities seemed to open up. Although all the autobiographical texts I examine – and those I do not – are useful to study the authors as individual artists, their importance here relies further on the fact that a substantial number of them belong to a particular period. It is a collection of texts that constitute a genre of its own kind – a genre that might be said to fulfil a function connected with the time in which the texts emerge. Women artists' autobiographical writings form a genre that demands women be recognised as artists in a historical moment that fervently disavows the rhetoric of social exclusion it enacts.

The kind of gender difficulties women faced as they then tried to make it as artists are not incidental, nor are they like any other difficulties. As I show in more depth in Chapter One, the literature review, via the work of Griselda Pollock (1988/2003) and Christine Battersby (1989, 2013), these complexities are the result of structured systems of meaning which have historically framed womanhood and femininity as antithetical to creativity. Artist, like the notion of human in which it is rooted, did not historically stand to mean all creative humans. Pollock highlights how, as it emerged, the modern concept of artist was defined in opposition to that which has traditionally been seen as paradigmatic of womanhood since the development of the bourgeoisie: the domestic (2003, p.49) – which includes all the roles women commonly occupy

within that space, such as those of caring mother, wife and housewife or dutiful daughter.

A consequence of the history that places artistic identity and domesticity in opposition is that women artists may have, at times, experienced stereotypical gendered roles as a risk. Nonetheless, as I will discuss throughout the thesis by drawing on feminist scholarship on emotion, dominant feminine or woman's roles might be attractive by virtue of the emotional and practical rewards they offer. For example, being a daughter or a mother, as is the case for Faith Ringgold (1995), can also be meaningful to certain women trying to succeed in the art world. Ultimately, experience of gender roles comes down to individual artists and narratives. However, I suggest that, within all cases, difficulties and conflicts can be mapped in women artists' autobiographical writings where the authors articulate expectations – their own and those of others around them. Scenes and anecdotes which convey expectations highlight women artists' potential difficulties in the sense that expectations give form to desirable modes of being which exist around them. Arlie Hochschild conveys in her work on emotional labour that expectations often sustain the dominant order of things (2012, p.43). However, I suggest that writing can be – has been – used to thwart these norms. As textual characters, women artists do not need to be accountable to social norms that might restrict their behaviour beyond the text. While they might not always be understood, seen, or represented as artists in their daily lives, nothing stops them from writing themselves as artists. Therefore, writing gives women artists space to reset the criteria through which they define themselves as subjects. A project such as mine here, works to make visible how and when different expectations and complexities become manifest in these narratives, as women artists engage in self-representation.

Thesis Outline: three projects of self-writing

To explore how women artists craft themselves as artists through writing, I analyse three sets of texts or bodies of writing in Chapters Three, Four and Five: first, Dorothea Tanning's memoirs, particularly the revised and expanded edition, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001), then, a selection of Leonora Carrington's short

stories from *The House of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (1989a) and *The Seventh Horse and Other Tales* (1989b), and finally, *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995) which I consider in conversation with her daughter's Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979/2015). The reason I have selected these examples is that each of them allows me to engage in depth with a stereotypically female role or figure which frequently recurs as a source of trouble in women artists' personal narratives. Specifically, these figures are those of the wife and housewife, the dutiful daughter, and the caring mother. Furthermore, these three figures are all roles women are often pressed to embody when in proximity to the domestic space, where, as I have mentioned, women artist often carry their lives and practice.

Before I go into my case studies however, Chapter One establishes the conceptual foundation of the project by mapping the literatures that have informed my understanding of creative identity and women artists' position in and beyond the art world. In this chapter, I first perform a partial genealogy of feminist art history to demonstrate how deconstructive, materialist, and psychoanalytic perspectives are crucial to begin imagining the complexities women face when trying to succeed as artists. Then, drawing on approaches from feminist philosophy and feminist studies on autobiography and memoir, I suggest that we can explore how women artists have addressed these challenges through autobiographical writing. I conclude that, insofar as personal narratives enable the author to articulate an image of the self that gives her ontological coherence (Cavarero, 2010) and rationalises subversive behaviour (Passerini, 1989), these texts can be read as sites through which to negotiate creative and gender figures.

After addressing how autobiographical narratives have been conceptualised as a means to craft textual selves we might live at ease with, I move into Chapter Two. Here I detail the logic that underpins my choice of scholarship in the literature review and how it shaped the overall project. Then, I outline the trajectory that led me to investigate autobiographical narratives as an entry point into women artists' everyday experiences. Specifically, I discuss how I understand autobiographical texts as a form of 'personal criticism' (Miller, 1991) that reflects difficulties women artists

have experienced. In the second part of the chapter, I describe the way in which domestic space operates both as topic and structuring thread across the three case studies. I explain my reading practices in more detail and illustrate how I perceive women visual artists' relationship to space as distinct from women writers' relationship to space. In the third and final part of the chapter, I delve into the concept of archives. I draw on Carolyn Stedman's work (2001) to illustrate how, through this thesis, I engage in an active process of narrativisation by means of which I connect formally different texts together. This interpretative strategy, I argue, enables me to craft a new story from bits and pieces borrowed from, often, completely different sources – such as is particularly visible in my use of Carrington's surrealist short stories.

The first case study I develop in Chapter Three centres around Dorothea Tanning's memoir *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001). Dorothea Margaret Tanning was an American surrealist painter, sculptor, and later in life, poet. One of three sisters, Tanning was born in 1910 in Galesburg, Illinois, into a middle-class family. In 1930, Tanning moved to Chicago to study painting at the Art Institute. She then continued her journey to New York and got her first break as an artist with a solo-exhibition at the Julien Levy gallery in 1944. Around the same time, she met German surrealist artist Max Ernst, who would become her second husband after her first marriage with writer Homer Shannon. Tanning and Ernst relocated multiple times in their life together, from New York to Arizona, to Touraine, Paris and Provence in France. After Ernst's death in 1976, Tanning moved back to New York and entered her most prolific creative period. She developed her sculpture and printmaking further, published two memoirs, the novel *Chasm: A Weekend* (2004) and two volumes of poetry. She died in 2012.

Tanning's memoir, *Between Lives*, is an expanded edition of *Birthday*, a previous autobiographical text Tanning published in 1987. And as the title indicates, one of the dominant motifs throughout the text is that Tanning represents herself as living somewhere 'between lives,' or in other terms, in a space of ambivalence. According to her description, her life is never solely a woman's or an artist's. She is pulled apart between her obligations and sometimes pleasures as a wife, and later housewife, and

her creative practice, even though both of these roles are intrinsic to her textual self. Because indecision recurs in this way, and because her memoir indicates that she spent a long period of her life fulfilling the roles of supporting wife and housewife, Tanning's narrative is ideal for me to investigate these particular figures.

In addition, I begin my analysis by exploring the roles of wife and housewife because these figures have historically provided the main counterpoint to the humanist definition of artist. As mentioned, Griselda Pollock details how, with the rise of the bourgeoisie at the end of the eighteenth century, discourses that denigrate women artists multiply, 'instituting categorical differences of identity between terms such as artist and woman' (2003, p.49). The logic of this bourgeois rhetoric was to secure the division of spheres which underpinned the nuclear family model, and thus sustained the new social structure. Tanning's memoir wrestles with the legacy of these ideas as her memoir enacts a transition where her textual self does not start as a wife and housewife, but actually becomes one. Through this shift, *Between Lives* enables me to show how these roles are not inherent to women. A woman artist only becomes a wife and housewife through a specific relationship and under a specific set of domestic responsibilities. In this way, *Between Lives* offers vivid descriptions of domestic space that allow me to discuss how this space imposes meaning on the lives that unravel under its roof.

It was indeed this text that led me to realise how for women artists, writing about life cannot be separated from writing about home, about intimate spaces, and family life. It cannot be separated because women artists inherit those gendered histories which permeate the intimate spaces that surround them. Almost every autobiographical text I have read placed art not in a studio that was separate from ordinary life, but as part of ordinary life. As it unfolds, this ordinary life requires that women artists adapt and negotiate not only the meaning domestic space imposes on them, but also how they are perceived within those spaces, where they also try to create. In that sense, Tanning's memoir enables me to explore under what conditions struggles engendered by the opposition between artistic and domestic life may come into existence.

In Chapter Four I continue my research with a selection of Leonora Carrington's surrealist short stories. Leonora Carrington was an English surrealist painter, writer and feminist. Daughter to a wealthy textile industrialist, Carrington was born in Chorley, Lancashire in 1917, where she received a rigid upbringing she would later rebel against. At twenty, Carrington eloped with her lover, Max Ernst, and moved to France, where she stayed for three years, until Ernst's arrest by the Gestapo in 1940. Distraught, Carrington fled to Spain, had a mental breakdown and was locked into psychiatric hospital – events she documented in the novella *Down Below* (2017). Following her stay in the hospital, Carrington married Mexican diplomat Renato Leduc in order to get a passport to leave Europe. And after a few months in New York, Carrington finally settled in Mexico City. Carrington was deeply inspired by Mexican mysticism and folklore, fruitful influences which are reflected in her highly imaginative artistic work. In addition, Mexico gave Carrington her close friendship with artist Remedios Varo, her second husband Chiki Weisz, and her two children. Mexico City was her home until her death in 2011.

The stories I explore in Chapter Four were written between 1937 and 1941, around the time Carrington abandoned the stately paternal household in England and moved to Provence to become an artist. Her stories were quick to grab my interest because they articulate rebellious femininities more openly than other similar texts whilst still acknowledging the weight of tradition. Furthermore, Carrington's writing places great emphasis on the opposition between gender norms and autonomous self-making. Specifically, the stories I focus on take as protagonist assertive young women who stand up against patriarchal authority to pursue artistic lives. Through these narratives, I am able to focus on the figure of the daughter. Daughters abound in Carrington's work as young girls who are pressured to reproduce their fathers' values by growing into *accomplished* women that will eventually recreate the patriarchal household elsewhere. However, Carrington's young women repeatedly frustrate normative expectations by disobeying their fathers, mocking them, and effectively escaping. Hence, these stories enable me to consider what is wanted from women as daughters as well as the strategies of resistance daughters might develop to oppose these demands – and the main strategy the chapter focuses on is that of the daughter's refusal to grow up into a woman.

Finally, Chapter Five revolves around *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995). Faith Ringgold is an African-American activist, teacher, and multidisciplinary artist. She was born in Harlem, New York City, in 1930, to caring working-class parents who keenly supported her creative interests. In 1948, Ringgold enrolled at City College to study art education. Before finishing her degree, Ringgold had already married, had two daughters, and divorced. Her twenties were spent split between her teaching, her painting, and raising her daughters – with whom she had a complex relationship. In 1962, Ringgold began an affair with Burdette Ringgold, who would become her husband and on and off companion for the rest of life. During the sixties and seventies, Ringgold got involved in the Black Arts movement, feminist activism, and deepened her commitment to art. Her creative practice developed hand in hand with her political ideas, and she went on to produce powerful socially critical artwork. In 1985, Ringgold became a professor at the University of California, San Diego, and from the nineties onwards, produced a series of award-winning children's books. Among the artists whose narratives I examine in this thesis, Ringgold, at the time of writing, is the only one alive.

I selected Ringgold's memoir in order to take the thesis in another direction. Unlike Tanning and Carrington, Ringgold does not depict familial and domestic gender roles as a drawback to achieve artistic identity. Gender roles, in particular the figure of mother, which I focus on in this chapter, are an intrinsic part of how the artist portrays her creative self. As an African-American woman coming of age as an artist in New York during the 1950s and 1960s, Ringgold struggled with both gender and race-fuelled difficulties as she attempted to fashion a career for herself. As a result, racist dynamics in the public sphere led the artist to define the domestic space and her role within it in particular terms. Although the family poses complex gender demands on her, Ringgold's writing emphasises instead the support and confidence they provide her in becoming an artist. Her memoir is useful for me to show how, from the perspective this artist positions herself, mothering and family life hold a special value as they work against systems of exclusion that have historically kept Black women and men from professional success.

In addition, Ringgold's memoir interests me because the supportive role the artist attributes to her family leads her to embrace responsibilities of care towards her community. In turn, these responsibilities lead her to merge creative and gender roles when representing herself in the story. As her extended family supports her, she supports them too. And so, through Ringgold's narrative, I am able to link her image as an artist with her image as a mother, feminist and Black activist, showing how she productively integrates multiple figures into a coherent textual persona.

Ringgold's memoir helps me illustrate how not all relationships women artists develop with gender roles are as conflicted as the ones I discuss in Chapter Three and Chapter Four. In this example, the ability of Ringgold's writing to construct a unified self-image in spite of the various roles she embodies enables me to reflect on how another kind of rapport is possible too. Mother, daughter, wife, and other similar roles might not always be what women artists seek to distance themselves from. As a Black woman, Ringgold received a particular set of social conditions, which are different from those white women receive in their journey towards creative self-making. Alexis Pauline Gumbs explains that 'the mother' is an idealised role that has traditionally excluded Black women while simultaneously pathologising them for *failing* to personify it (2016, p.116). However, Gumbs adds, the survival of Black children and Black communities depends on Black mothers and mothering (p.118). Therefore, for African-American women, the figure of the mother has its own connotations. In this manner, Ringgold's case serves to highlight how each woman artist is forced to negotiate specific possibilities and roles that might trigger other modes of self-understanding. Motherhood necessarily brings up different challenges for her as a Black woman, for she does not share the same historical relationship to it as white women do.

Not all Black women artists would respond to the rhetoric around motherhood and artistic identity such as Ringgold does. However, I decided to complete my enquiry with Ringgold's writing to explore and expose how subjects address social challenges through the historical legacy they have inherited. Ringgold's memoir is an exciting text for me to end on because through her response to the problem of artistic

identity, I am able to analyse how women artists might develop different solutions to the problem of self-representation they all face.

To do justice to the texts I consider here, I have organised this thesis around three artists and their autobiographical writings. However, I would not have been able to identify significant patterns or elements in women artists' narratives if I had not read a much large number of autobiographical texts throughout my research. Artists such as Anne Truitt (1982, 1986, 1996), Louise Nevelson (1976), Georgia O'Keeffe (1990, 2003) and others have also accompanied me along this journey, helping me understand and interpret the thoughts and stories women artists share. Three sets of texts cannot represent all struggles women artists go through. However, I would argue that my selection of autobiographical writings eloquently addresses recurrent difficulties women artists experience in everyday spaces, situations and roles. To that extent, I hope these three case studies permit me to address some of the most significant challenges women artists face and articulate in their personal accounts and projects of self-representation.

Chapter One: literature review

1 Introduction

This project investigates how women artists write about themselves and their artistic practice as a way of asking questions about gender, subjectivity and creativity. If historically the artist has been assumed by default to be a man, how do women artists challenge what is meant to be an artist? What kind of strategies and tactics do they use to create space for themselves as women artists?

To answer these questions, this project builds upon scholarship in the field of feminist art history, particularly on its powerful critiques of art history as a masculinist domain. In this literature review, I examine key works and strands in feminist art history with specific reference to how they engage or do not engage with how women experience themselves as artists. But the subject of how to approach the figure of the woman artist is not only relevant to feminist art history. The woman artist brings with her other questions that have been central to feminist scholarship across a range of disciplines, including literary studies, history and philosophy. These questions include issues of agency, representation, self-making and self-writing. In the second part of the literature review, I consider how such feminist work offers other models to conceptualise the figure of the woman artist, as well as to define how and why she matters. More specifically, I will show that we might read autobiographical texts by women artists as a way of examining how the figure of the woman artist operates discursively. At the same time, I will address how, by reading these autobiographical writings, we can better comprehend how women artists experience – even live with – that figure, insofar as rhetorical constructions become the basis of how subjects understand themselves.

When looking at recent feminist art history, it quickly becomes apparent that the question of how women develop into artists has become less central over time. In contrast, earlier feminist art scholarship was profoundly concerned with how gender and sexuality influence whether and how women can embody creative roles. Feminist scholars explored how women had often had to challenge received notions of art and

creativity to achieve artistic identity. This project follows in the steps of that academic tradition by asking how women artists experience and narrate the challenges of making art in the twentieth century. As such, much theory relevant to my research dates from the 1980s or at the latest the 1990s, when feminists began deconstructing and problematising notions such as artist, creativity and genius (Rozsika Parker & Griselda Pollock, 1981/2013; Pollock, 1988/2003; Christine Battersby, 1989; Anne Wagner, 1996/1998). Little feminist art history in the 2000s responds to the way I seek to approach women artists and experience. Marsha Meskimmon (2003) and Christine Battersby (2013), who is more a philosopher than an art historian, are exceptions I detail later. Throughout this literature review, I analyse how and why the concern with women artists' experience as creators receded. I explore how poststructuralist and anti-essentialist theoretical paradigms complicated the terms of research, not only by challenging the idea that experience can be foundational or stable, but also by questioning the very coherence of *woman*⁶. These critiques were powerful and important. I want to suggest that we can return to the question of women's experience as artists *not by suspending these critiques but by drawing from them*, while simultaneously complementing them with feminist interventions beyond the field of feminist art history.

This chapter maps, details and reviews some of the main strands of thought in feminist art history. I start by outlining how the field emerges to challenge the epistemological foundation of art history, and then move on to introduce theories of deconstruction (Parker and Pollock, 2013; Pollock, 2003; Lisa Tickner, 1988) and approaches to sexual difference (Hilary Robinson, 2006; Lucy Lippard, 1984, 1995; Battersby, 1989). In particular, I focus on the concept of woman that these theorists work with. I assess and acknowledge the ways in which the different strands of theory inform each other, while at the same time showing how this project is indebted to these bodies of work. The chapter then considers how we can also approach the question of how women figure, craft and define themselves as artists

⁶ As I stress in the second part of the chapter, questions of authorship in feminist literary criticism followed a similar trajectory. Scholars initially sought to make women's long unacknowledged experiences *visible*, but later turned away from seemingly stable categories of identity when it became clear that terms such as *woman* or *difference* could produce their own exclusions.

by drawing on feminist approaches to autobiography and self-writing. My purpose is to show how the project is situated within a wider set of interdisciplinary feminist literatures about women as subjects who actively work to create life in their own terms.

1.1 Feminist Art History: a political project and an anti-establishment *practice*

The first step that feminist art historians took when they started to question the foundation of art history was to revisit the past in order to *recover* forgotten women artists. Recovering lost and hidden women's traditions was a pivotal strategy common to feminist historians working in all disciplines. Such as historians of sexuality, working-class communities and race, scholars documenting women's contributions to culture aimed to demonstrate the existence of peoples and communities ignored by hegemonic histories. However, feminist critics soon shifted the focus of the discipline as they began interrogating the systems of value and meaning which operate in the art world. Feminist art history has been, almost since its inception in the 1970s, a project which aims to question and disrupt the epistemological foundation of art history itself. It is not a branch of art history dealing with women's art (although there are such kinds of projects which naively claim that including women's art is sufficient as feminist practice). Instead, as Nochlin outlines, feminist art history is a challenging body of work which actively endeavours to expose the ahistorical and apolitical precepts that sustain the dominant paradigm of modernist art history. Nochlin states, '[a]t its strongest a feminist art history is a transgressive and anti-establishment *practice*' which exposes the formalist and structural system of exclusion art history institutes (emphasis added, 1989, p.xii). As 'practice,' feminist art history is therefore not only theory, but a revisionary form of action. Feminist art history offers a profound challenge to art history's classical objects of study: the artist and the artwork. A practice is an attempt to modify an object or to generate new objects. Thus, Miriam Van Rijsingen suggests that, when referring to feminist art history, it is more accurate to talk about 'feminist interventions in art history' as its objective is to undermine the supremacy of dominant narratives and write new stories (1995, p.94). Inspired by social justice,

feminist art history is not an alternative to the core discipline, but a creative political response that diverts from art history in its objectives, strategies and narratives.

1.1.1 A feminist Beginning: Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?

There are many different places where one could begin a genealogy of feminist art history and its approach to women as artists. But as many others have done before, I want to take as my starting point Linda Nochlin's classic essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?' which was first published in 1971. Nochlin's essay was ground-breaking because it inaugurated institutional criticism of art history from a feminist perspective. The essay offered feminist critique as a challenge to the institutional structures which operate in the art world. Nochlin's was not the only text that had been written on women and art at that point. Yet, it was the first in arguing that representation systems worked hand-in-hand with institutionalised practices to discriminate against women artists and artists from other minorities, including artists of colour. Nochlin argued that women's position as 'outsiders' qualified them to show the limits of knowledge produced from a white male viewpoint (1971, p.146). She suggested that, because women artists were outsiders, they were able to expose how art history's implicit white male viewpoint was not universal.

In my view, one of Nochlin's major contributions was to show that, for women, becoming an artist was incredibly difficult, particularly if they did not benefit from familial support. For a profession to become a possibility, certain material conditions are necessary, but those conditions also include ideas and beliefs, not all of which need to be openly articulated. Nochlin shows that tacit beliefs about women's role in the traditional division of spheres had kept them oriented towards the family and the home. In the text, she states how 'the amounts of time necessarily devoted to social functions, the very kind of activities demanded – simply made total devotion to art production out of the question' (1971, p.157). Moreover, Nochlin explained, those women who nevertheless contravened tradition and aspired to an artistic life, were faced with serious impediments in the public sphere - the most relevant of which was their lack of access to the nude model (p.158). Without access to the nude model, women could not develop the essential drawing skills required for History Painting,

the 'highest' artistic genre from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century.

Nochlin's essay offered a powerful account of how social practices had historically excluded women. Even when they became artists, women's relation to the art world was thus deeply ambivalent – about constraint as much as possibility. Ironically however, Nochlin did not question the very concept of 'great art,' although she would do so in subsequent writing. In agreement with dominant paradigms, Nochlin defined art as a 'self-consistent language of form... given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation' (1971, p.149). She proposed this perspective against what she saw as a misconception: the idea that art was a product of personal and individual expression. This argument enabled Nochlin to explain how women had not had access to the right conditions for cultural production. Yet, the argument left unaddressed the question of value through which art history had traditionally upheld forms of production which women had no way of accessing, to the detriment of styles and modes of creation they could more easily engage in. *Why* were the Impressionist paintings of Renoir, Monet and Cassat great art? *Why*, for centuries, has history painting been considered more worthwhile than flower painting? No matter who actually produced all those *great* artworks, *who* had determined that certain conventions were more valuable than others?

Nochlin highlighted structural impediments to women's involvement in the arts, but, by retaining the Modernist meaning of art as form, she sanctioned the notion on which the structure was built. I do not point this out to dismiss her work. In fact, Nochlin changed her position in 1974 when she wrote that feminist revisionism enables us to re-evaluate artwork which had historically been rejected (p.85). I point this out because, as she hoped, conditions of possibility for women improved throughout the twentieth century. However, discourses of artistic value still exerted their dominance - in spite of increasingly present feminist critiques which took issue with the notion of 'greatness' (Duncan, 1975/1993; Battersby 1989). Hence, while women gained more access to the art world, this was only a relative improvement.

We can learn from the difficulties even feminists have gone through when imagining the possibility of women as artists.

It is important for my project to acknowledge the resilience of *greatness* as a concept, because the term has systematically worked to exclude women from the art world. Greatness is an arbitrary qualification that masks itself as an impartial value judgement. As Carol Duncan explains, art historians conceal the term's male and racial biases by appealing to universal and ahistorical ideals of artistic 'quality' (1993, p.122). Hegemonic art history takes as a cause what it produces as an effect when attributing greatness to objects and practices developed by men. It figures men as great artists by qualifying their artwork as exceptional. In this manner, the resilience of greatness as a core concept of art history is how the artist retains his status as a male figure. And this resilience means that, no matter how much space women artists created for themselves, they came up against an idea of art from which many felt excluded. In my project I explore how this ambivalence is reflected in their autobiographical writing. While the texts I examine illustrate how women gained more access to the field, they also show how they struggled to define themselves and their practice through such a restrictive concept of art.

In addition, accepting the idea of 'great art' was what led Nochlin to establish evaluative distinctions between different strategies in feminist art history, which reflect the three main paths the discipline has taken. In many cases, these distinctions are the cause of factionalisms which led to the conceptual impasse of the 1990s. After deconstructive and psychoanalytic perspectives problematised notions of authorship and gender, feminist scholars became wary of making claims about 'women's art.' In particular, Toril Moi, Kristen Frederickson and others cite Roland Barthes' 'The death of the Author' (1967/1999) as the cause for scholars' increasing reluctance to explore questions of women's authorship in the 1990s (Frederickson, 2003, p.5; Moi 2009, p.3)⁷. If identity is a construct, then talking about *women's issues* risked reifying that

⁷ While Barthes brought into question notions of authorship, it is worth noting, as Linda Anderson does, that he is 'also the writer who initiated feminist critics [like Jane Gallop and Nancy K. Miller] into a more subjective mode' of criticism (2007, p.145). This is particularly significant for this project as I extensively draw on Miller in my methodology.

construct. It was critical to avoid equating woman with any immutable essence. Thus, in an effort to avoid essentialism, poststructuralist feminist art historians turned towards the artwork as a more reliable object of study. As a result, the elusive subject of woman as artist was to some extent left behind.

The first strategy Nochlin details in her essay is the ideological critique of social structures – the position she herself embraced. This is also, as I describe later, the perspective poststructuralist and deconstructive feminists would take up and develop, analysing women's historical position in relation to the art world (Tickner, 1988; Parker & Pollock, 2013; Pollock, 1987, 2003). The second strategy that Nochlin considers and then dismisses is that of revisiting the past to 'rehabilitate' forgotten women artists (1971, p.147). It follows that if this strategy is undertaken without questioning the notion of greatness, it can hardly succeed, because according to dominant art history standards, those forgotten women artists are still positioned as minor. Hence, early recovery projects such as Eleanor Tufts' *Our Hidden Heritage: Five Centuries of Women Artists* (1974) or Karen Petersen's & J. J. Wilson's *Women Artists: Recognition and Reappraisal from the Early Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (1975) could only have a limited impact on our understanding of art history. In her famous essay on experience, Joan Scott details how scholars who first sought to document histories of difference, such as women's histories, problematically naturalised difference by portraying it as a 'reflection of the real' (1991, p.776). Instead, Scott argued, critical endeavour should explore the mechanisms by which that difference was established. Scott's comments highlight how, to bring about an ideological challenge, a restorative strategy would need to explain the logic that had led to art history's neglect of those artists and propose different criteria to assess them. This leads me to the third approach Nochlin details: that of conceiving a *different* form of greatness for women's art. Nochlin rejects this evaluative strategy on the basis that there are no apparent feminine 'stylistic' commonalities among women. 'Women artists and writers [she states] would seem to be closer... [to their contemporaries] than they are to each other' (1971, p.149). However, Nochlin is not fully dismissive of this strategy, as she also acknowledges that women's shared position in society might give them some common ground.

The divisions Nochlin's essay outlines would prove detrimental to feminist criticism. They prompted scholars following different traditions to attack each other, rather than work together. Furthermore, they established artificial boundaries, as if the strategies were mutually exclusive, while combined, they could generate more complex and nuanced scholarship, as some of the best feminist art history projects eventually produced. For instance, Pollock's analysis of Pre-Raphaelite poet Elizabeth Siddall explores the writer as a figure but also as a subject, illustrating how deconstructive analysis could not have taken place without prior historical research⁸. In addition, this example shows the benefits of going further in our enquiry once we have taken hold of archive materials. I have attempted to give shape to my research by following a similarly less compartmentalised model, which combines the three strategies Nochlin outlines. While twentieth century women's writing is not historically distant, I have had to look back into the past to find and study these autobiographical texts. In addition, as Nochlin and deconstructive perspectives suggest we do, I analyse the ideological dynamics that underpin the roles, events and encounters women artists recount. But also, following evaluative criticism, I look for patterns that relate to the authors' experience as women.

Nevertheless, to say that I combine these strategies is not to say that every perspective in feminist art history can or should be reconciled with all others. Moreover, there are multiple perspectives within each branch of feminist criticism, depending on the theoretical basis each scholar draws on. In fact, this statement is particularly significant in relation to evaluative approaches which postulate that women's art may have common characteristics. Internal variations between theories of women's difference are contingent on the notions of woman and subjectivity which they deploy. It is not the same to argue for a specifically female or feminine subconscious as it is to say cultural discourses impact women's sense of the self. Thus, later in this chapter I will compare dominant theories of women's difference, including psychoanalytic, socialist, and an existential and linguistic perspective. But

⁸ For more details see Pollock (2003), where the author combines archival research that situates Elizabeth Siddall in history with an analysis of her image as a cultural 'sign' of masculine creativity (p.134).

beforehand, in the following section, I examine deconstructive and poststructuralist critiques of *artist* and *art* in feminist art history. I will show how contributions from deconstructive feminist art historians such as Pollock (2003) and Tickner (1988) inform my understanding of the connection between discourses, representation and women artists' self-portrayal.

1.1.2 Deconstruction and Poststructuralist Feminist Interventions: representation, concepts of artistic identity and contesting institutionalised systems of meaning

In her persuasive essay 'Feminism, Art History and Sexual Difference' (1988) Lisa Tickner explains why an effective feminist art history can never be anything else but a project of deconstruction. Tickner describes how the generalised art history paradigm that we are taught in the academy is founded on a bourgeois Anglo-Saxon tradition, whose characteristics are antithetical to feminism (p.251). Modernist art history, Tickner claims, 'is severed from the social circumstances of its production' due to its ahistorical emphasis on formalist innovation and cult of art as an expression of the individual artist (p.251). Furthermore, it fails to acknowledge the system of cultural representation in which the object participates, because it focuses on the isolated art object as source of enquiry (p.252). Accordingly, Tickner maintains that art history which centres on object-centred analysis does not examine how the artwork is both a receptacle and a vehicle of broader meanings connected to discourses outside this field. Hence, the arguments Tickner details illustrate how, while working within this dominant paradigm, it is impossible to question why women – or for that matter Black and minority artists – have historically not been allowed the same opportunities to participate in the art world, nor given equal value when they did.

Tickner's answer to the limitations of modernist art history is to propose the art object as 'text' (p.254). She argues that the artwork can be analysed in relation both to its circumstances of production and as a space where ideas materialise by framing it as a text – a site through which meaning circulates. Such a form of analysis enables feminist critics to develop more complex art histories, through which we can examine

points of conflict, tension and overlap between the artwork and other sites of representation.

The branch of feminist art history which Tickner's work exemplifies is a form of deconstructive feminism informed by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic discourses and Marxist critiques of society. It originates in Britain, and it is by no means representative of all positions in feminist art history. However, to a great extent, this approach has come to be seen as the most rigorous form of criticism feminist art history has produced. According to Lucy Lippard, this criticism's 'more advanced level of theoretical discussion' responds to its geographical location (1980/1984, p.131). Lippard argues that in England socialist feminist aims have benefited from the 'attention of a small but vocal community' and ties with left wing political parties (p.131), whereas in America, Lippard adds, socialist art movements have been more sporadic and marginalised. Nonetheless, deconstructive feminist art history has also been championed by academics engaged in revisionist scholarship beyond the Atlantic due to its theoretical sophistication. For example, Patricia Mathews uses it as a benchmark against which to judge other feminist art historians' critical commitment⁹.

In an article which aims to map the development of the field, Thalia Gouma-Peterson and Mathews are critical of feminist art historians who do not incorporate deconstructive and psychoanalytic methodologies into their research. These authors draw a strict distinction between first and second-generation criticism, presenting both positions as pitted against each other. They make an explicit value judgement as they argue that the earlier feminist critique, 'sometimes termed essentialist, conceives of woman as a fixed category determined through societal and cultural institutions' (1987, p.346). Their own position, on the other hand, 'sees woman as an

⁹ This is particularly visible in Mathews review of Whitney Chadwick's *Women, Art, and Society*, originally published in 1990. In this long review Mathews praises Chadwick's stated aim to criticise the institutions and ideologies that sustain a patriarchal model of art history. Yet, she repeatedly takes issue with Chadwick's failure to achieve this aim, when the latter positions women artists in relation to the dominant canon.

unfixed category, constantly in process, examined through her representation and ideological construction within a male system' (p.346). Gouma-Peterson and Mathews' arguments reproduce a debate common in feminist and gender studies that reinforces an inequitable distinction, for it is rare that allegedly essentialist feminists would claim woman as a fixed category either. As a result, Gouma-Peterson and Mathews do not address how culturally and historically located definitions of woman have concrete effects on lived experience. They present early feminist scholarship simply as separatist, and criticise theories of difference for reproducing patriarchal categories and false consciousness. The overt hostility between positions informed by poststructuralist theories and empirical strategies of analysis in feminist art history has often foreclosed the possibility of combining both of these bodies of work – although there are exceptions, such as Lucy Lippard in her later criticism¹⁰. Also, more contemporary theorists, for instance Marsha Meskimmkon (2003), manages to reconcile insights from both approaches in her work on subjectivity.

However, while the type of feminist art history which Tickner, Mathews, and more famously, Griselda Pollock, represent has limitations when considering lived experience, this branch of theory has come to stand as the pinnacle of criticism. This body of work offers powerful insight, which I build on in my own research when examining strategies of self-representation in women artists' personal narratives of localised experiences. In particular, deconstructive feminist art history offers a vantage point to analyse how the figure of the artist has been sustained by a male tradition. It has an extraordinary capacity to highlight the constitutive exclusions that have equated artist with white man, which is deeply relevant to this project. Pollock argues that, in art discourses, 'the artist... is presented as an ineffable ideal which complements the bourgeois myths of a universal, classless Man' (2003, p.20). Thus,

¹⁰ When she was first involved in feminist art activism and criticism, Lucy Lippard championed a separatist approach to feminist art. At this earlier point she sought to establish commonalities in women's art in terms of shared images and political approaches. However, as explained in 'Issue and Taboo,' she later broadened her perspective, arguing for a need to analyse women's art through social 'structures and effects,' even though she still believed women's shared social experiences made their art differ from men's (1980/1984, pp.125-126).

although it is framed as neutral, the term 'artist' is in fact based on an abstract white, male, heterosexual subject. However, discourses in art history do not openly declare that personifying these identities is the condition for becoming an artist. Pollock explains elsewhere that the masculine character of the artist only becomes visible when considering the term in relation to other individuals whose identity as artists needs to 'be qualified by an adjective' which precedes it – for instance 'black artist' or 'queer artist' (Pollock in Pollock & Parker, 2013, p.xix). Conversely, she states, it is unusual to encounter the designation 'male artist' because by default the artist is figured as male (p.xix). Hence, in the same way that word human has historically excluded non-male non-white subjects, the term artist only applies to certain individuals.

Yet, the term artist misleadingly sustains the belief that anybody can be an artist because it disavows its specificity. Pollock argues that as a result, when the term is used alongside another identity category, such as in 'woman artist', that added category effectively prevents us from identifying woman with artist (2013, p.xix). Furthermore, the annexed term seems to undermine the cultural value of 'artist' because it reflects cultural specificity and not an ideal of 'universal' creativity. Consequently, 'woman' in the term 'woman artist' adds a layer of meaning which works to disqualify women from being genuinely perceived as artists.

At the same time, deconstructive and poststructuralist art history shows how the discourses of high art have run in historical parallel with institutionalised practices which prevented women from entering the art world. Through its critique, poststructuralist feminist criticism has highlighted a number of noticeable effects which gender bias has produced on art history. These include a systematic disregard for the work of female artists and the conceptual production of woman as the antithesis of cultural creativity. Pollock (2003) in particular shows that, taken together, social practices and art history systems of representation establish a Foucauldian 'regime of truth' defined along the axis of sexual difference. Thus, in her view, the feminist struggle ought to be:

[A] fight against dominant and established systems of meaning and the positions and identities they attempt to secure. To sustain a genuine intervention which can unsettle the dominant ‘regime of truth,’ oppositional practices must articulate with alternative, contrary, sets of meanings and social practices, ideologies which are being constructed in terms of historically relevant social struggles (Pollock, 1987, p. 121).

As the quote makes apparent, Pollock’s interest lies in representation. For her, analysing how artistically recognised artworks convey, for example, traditional images of femininity, is key to understanding the way in which art history’s ‘great’ works are used as placeholders for dominant ideals that define gender roles. Hence, she locates the core of political dissent in the image. When Pollock states that feminists ought to get involved in ‘oppositional practices,’ she is arguing that they should read art objects in relation to their social context so as to reveal different meanings behind those images. In the same stroke, she also seems to suggest that feminist artists must create artworks which actively articulate other values. In fact, Pollock favours artists who have tended to produce extremely self-reflexive conceptual artwork, such as Mary Kelly¹¹. Therefore, what this excerpt also highlights is that Pollock is aware of any meaning’s constructed nature, both in the art world and around the art object. And, therefore, she stresses how the difference between dominant or alternative readings does not lie in their ‘truth’ value. It lies in the ideological systems they uphold. While modernist art history is representative of a system of exclusion with the ‘white male artist’ at its centre, feminist art historians should ‘create meanings’ which support, as Pollock terms it: women’s ‘social

¹¹ In all the years that she has been engaged in feminist art history, Griselda Pollock has consistently promoted the work of Mary Kelly. In chapter 7 of *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity and Histories of Art*, ‘Screening the Seventies: Sexuality and Representation in Feminist Practice – A Brechtian Perspective,’ Pollock draws heavily on Kelly’s ‘Post Partum Document (1973-1979)’ piece to illustrate her arguments. She has also included Kelly in numerous essays, been in conversation with the artist herself (Vancouver Art Gallery, 1989) and spoken about Kelly in public talks (most recently at a panel at the ICA in November 2016, organised to accompany the launch of the October Files vol. 20 on Mary Kelly, to which Pollock contributes with an essay).

struggles' for equality. She encourages us to undertake an open ideological battle by reading images differently.

The proposal which Pollock puts forward is highly theoretical. At times, her descriptions of representation sound almost as if reality could only be perceived as a discourse. Yet, it is apparent that if it is relevant to consider how discourses work, it is because they have practical and embodied consequences, which affect women's lives. As Scott explains, to acknowledge that identities are 'ascribed, resisted or embraced' through complex discursive processes, does not mean they do not have practical and material effects (1991, p.792). Indeed, Scott adds, behaviour can be interpreted 'in term of their [figures', identities' and subject positions'] operations' (p.792). To that extent, Pollock's arguments have mattered to me when conceiving this research. This project differs from what Pollock herself proposes in that I examine texts (autobiographical writings) and not artworks. In addition, I analyse them as much for *what* they represent as for *how* they articulate strategies to navigate issues which women artists experience. As a result, I connect the texts with the authors who wrote them. This is at odds with deconstructive approaches which avoid the subject of authorship. However, I do not try to provide an all-encompassing definition of what a woman artist is as I comment on the relationship between texts and lives. But I do work from the perspective that gendered experiences of the world shape women artists because representational practices influence how women figure themselves as artists. Hence, my focus is on the artist's ability to turn herself into text and not on her artwork as a separate entity.

Without an analysis of representation such as Pollock or Tickner perform, it is difficult to envisage how the myths around womanhood, femininity and artistic identity which women artists encounter, might create problems in the first place. It is because representation carries implicit beliefs, as Pollock states (1987, p. 121), that it produces 'positions' which women might be compelled to assume – positions I explore through their writings.

It could be argued that my emphasis on women artists' autobiographical writing as a medium where women artists negotiate expectations fits Pollock's call to trace

‘alternative sets of meaning.’ The same argument could apply to my own reading of the texts. Just as Tickner also encourages feminists to do, this project is intent on creating ‘narratives of its own’ which trouble the adequacy of hegemonic art historical narratives (1988, p.255). To that extent, it is true that the position from which I work supports the notion that producing alternative stories changes the way we might see the world – a poststructuralist argument. Yet, this project’s interest in experience, relationality, embodied cultural ideals and the role of autobiographical writing as a strategy of self-production, requires that I also locate the research in relation to other approaches to feminist art history – particularly, to theories which account for women’s difference.

Poststructuralist and deconstructive approaches are not in opposition to the idea of gendered and sexual difference per se. However, they highlight the fact that this difference is a result of ideological systems which create a limited set of positions for subjects to occupy. Scott argues that the ‘linguistic determinism’ of these positions does not reduce people’s experiences to texts, but rather ‘insists... on the productive quality of discourse’ at a given moment in time (1991, p.793). Identities circulate around and through people’s lives demanding to be taken into account. Furthermore, Scott explains that ‘[s]ince discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual’ (p.793). Therefore, although experience is textually mediated, it is important for my project to return to those central categories through which a person’s life and actions are given sense and meaning, particularly gender. For women artists living in the twentieth century, being a woman was a constitutive fiction which both pushed them in particular directions (often far from art) and connected them with each other through their encounters with common tropes of appropriate gender behaviour.

Thus, in the following section I examine key critical approaches which foreground women’s difference in feminist art history. I focus on the type of subject these perspectives propose in order to analyse how they conceptualise women’s subjectivity. I begin by exploring a psychoanalytic approach which derives from French feminism. Then, I move on to investigate a socialist perspective which is based on historically located cultural experiences, and on an analysis of female and artistic

labour. And finally, moving into the second part of this chapter, I present a perspective which insists on women artists' embodied existence as women, while showing how the art world's rhetoric of sexual difference works against them.

1.1.3 Specificity in Women's Lives, Subjectivity and Experiences: perspectives of sexual difference in feminist art history

Feminist critics who postulate shared elements in women's art demonstrate a typical trait in their work. Most of them search for similarities among women by looking at their creative production (Lippard, 1984, 1995; Meskimmon, 2003; Robinson, 2006; Suleiman, 2012). Feminist scholars bring together and examine artwork and writing by women artists, suggesting alternatively that the foundation of women's similarity is psychic, embodied, experiential, or all of these at the same time. In that sense, I would argue that the starting point in this approach is based on the assumption that *there is something specific about being a woman artist, and that that something can be brought to the surface through the researcher's reading of the work.* Thus, accounts of evaluative criticism illustrate the reader's way of analysing women artists' work, as she looks for patterns that underscore women's *difference* – while at the same time not reducing women to that difference. Commonalities cannot be proven, but they can be convincingly argued for. Following this logic, feminist evaluative criticism is as much an ideological practice as deconstruction is, as it aims to produce alternative narratives based on the notion of women's experience.

In this framework, woman is imagined as part of a community of women by means of her cultural inscription into the world, language and/or her material body. For academics invested in this approach, gender and sexuality (insofar as gender and sexuality are presented as contiguous in patriarchal culture) often function as temporarily stable elements within a cultural and historical location. Their contextualised stability aims to *guarantee* that the knowledge these critics produce represents women's experience truthfully. However, to talk about truth here does not mean that scholars using this strategy sustain notions of womanhood or femininity as if these were simply real. It means that these researchers consider how gender and sexuality come into being with women's entry into the world, or in

psychoanalytic terms, into the symbolic. And from that perspective, they argue that concepts of gender and sexuality affect women's self-understanding and creative production, because as categories of intelligibility, gender and sexuality influence how women may perceive the world at a particular time and place. Perspectives vary, however, in particular regarding how stable these forms of difference are over time. While some theorists insist on long-lasting female subjectivities, others foreground more fluid and changing selves.

One body of work that foregrounds fluidity is French feminist psychoanalytic theory. Theories of women's difference based on psychoanalytic notions of gender and sexuality have been particularly influential in feminist studies exploring women's creativity. Its main representatives, Luce Irigaray (1974/1985a; 1977/1985b), Hélène Cixous (1976) and Julia Kristeva (1974/1984) are often conflated together as the proponents of *l'écriture féminine*. *L'écriture féminine* is a deliberately subversive form of writing which employs 'feminine characteristics' as a strategy to disrupt patriarchal language and culture. Feminist art historians have actively drawn on French feminism's critical insights to interpret the work of women artists. Notable examples include Hilary Robinson (2006) and Christine Battersby (1989, 1998, 2013) who employ the work of Irigaray, and Susan Suleiman (2012) who draws on Cixous. However, as Battersby points out, there are significant differences among feminist French theorists, the most substantial of which is that, while Irigaray and Cixous ground potential for disruption in women's bodies, Kristeva contends that this source is located within femininity (2013, p.21). Thus, for Kristeva, *l'écriture féminine* and linguistic approaches to challenge dominant culture are not contiguous with women, but with femininity itself.

In more recent times, clinical psychologist and artist Bracha L. Ettinger (2006) developed her theory of 'the matrixial gaze' which follows the tradition of *l'écriture féminine* insofar as its logic is premised on 'the maternal body.' Ettinger formulates the matrixial as an alternative understanding of culture that competes with the Lacanian phallic gaze. This framework enables Ettinger to prioritise relationality, shared affect and the transcendence of boundaries between subject and object as characteristics of feminine 'trans-subjectivity.' While Ettinger's work was originally

located in feminist film theory, she has had a significant impact on the field of feminist art history. For example, in contrast with her prior work on deconstruction, Griselda Pollock adapted Ettinger's work in *Differencing the Canon: Feminism and the Writing of Arts Histories* (1999), to reread traditional art histories through 'the matrixial.'

Given my interest in placing this project in conversation with theoretical perspectives which explore the role of women in art, I will now analyse in more depth Hilary Robinson's *Reading Art, Reading Irigaray: The Politics of Art by Women* (2006). Robinson's book is a good example of how French feminist psychoanalytic approaches have been used to analyse women artists' difference as an embodied condition. She interprets a number of artists' production through the work of Irigaray, who places the body as the locus of difference (1985a; 1985b).

Robinson aligns herself with theories of 'psychic' difference by arguing that women's art represents the gender identity of the maker through both its content and materials (2006, p.3). She positions herself in this theoretical context by building on the idea that women's entry into culture shapes their self-perception and production. In line with the general characteristics I detail above, her objective in the research is to create new methods of understanding and reading art by women, which can compete with institutionalised art history. Influenced by Pollock's later work (1999), that of Robinson is also a textual intervention. Like Pollock, her stated hope is to challenge the 'phallic order of representation.' However, while Pollock's work, in its deconstructive and poststructuralist logic, employs a Kristevan framework to seek for traces of the 'maternal' in both male and female artists' work, Robinson focuses on work made exclusively by women. Fundamentally, she proposes rethinking representation through Irigaray's model of productive mimesis, contending that mimetic practices can exceed representation's dominant meanings, creating a discursive space for women to define their roles and express their desires (2006, p.29)¹². Robinson's strategy of analysis is in correlation to her particular

¹² It may be enquired why I have deemed it relevant here to explore the work of a feminist art historian who employs Luce Irigaray's analytical concepts, while I have not included Irigaray's own analysis of

understanding of womanhood as a psychic reality which has effects on women's relationship to their bodies. She chooses to employ psychoanalytic categories because she presumes they reveal an underlying female subjectivity.

Robinson argues that drawing on Irigaray's theoretical concepts can help us make women's creative practices legible. The tools of patriarchal culture, she explains, are inadequate for such a project because they do not grant woman subjectivity (2006, p.3). Judith Butler, who herself draws on the philosopher's work, explains that Irigaray's theories originate from the premise that classical philosophy institutes a phallogocentric discourse that both displaces and erases the feminine (1993, p.10). This discourse, which according to Irigaray organises Western culture, figures the masculine as form and the feminine as matter, creating an order where man is the active principle, or that which shapes the world to fit his own desires. And woman, on the other side of the binary, she adds, is what has been discursively produced as inert matter (Butler, 1993, p.13). Hence, in this figuration, woman's body is imagined as a receptacle for meaning, deprived of the possibility to define, create or desire (p.13). She is the mirror of man. However, Butler also clarifies, it is key to Irigaray's argument that the feminine exceeds its figuration into language (p.15). In other words, insofar as the feminine cannot be defined by language because language is phallogocentric, it exists outside of language as a stream of disruptive possibilities which threaten dominant culture (p.20).

Robinson details in her research that these possibilities arise from the mutually constitutive relationship that exists between a woman's empirical experience of her body and the syntax that defines this body in the symbolic (2006, p.98). It is what Irigaray refers to as morphology – the female sex morphology – from which women can unsettle phallogocentric discourse from within their own bodies. In that light,

women's art. Besides the fact that Irigaray produced little scholarship on this topic, the answer to that question is addressed in Robinson's introduction to her book, where she explains that while the concepts are critically productive, Irigaray never applied them to women's artwork herself (2006, p.6). Robinson illustrates this point with Irigaray's disturbing review of Unica Zürn's artwork (1994) in which Irigaray dismisses the artist as a 'failure,' arguing that Zürn's lack of coherent subjectivity makes her art 'ugly'.

Irigaray contends that female morphology opens up a space of subjectivity for women to express themselves. Through this idea, Robinson approaches women's art as a reflection or manifestation of their experiences. She uses Irigaray's strategies of disruption – mimicry, productive mimesis and the masquerade – to conceptualise how women's art articulates female subjectivities, challenging phallogocentric discourse and patriarchal culture in the process.

Robinson explains to readers that her project responds to the depoliticisation of women's art in the 1990s (2006, p.2). And her aim is to counter this tendency by developing new reading strategies through which to interpret women's art in a way that acknowledges the artist's gendered subjectivity. In that sense, her account offers decided advantages when interpreting women's art. She leaves room for multiple versions of art history to coexist by openly calling into the picture the reader's subjectivity and giving her the opportunity to view art works differently. To an extent, Robinson facilitates Irigaray's proposal to create an 'active practice of intersubjective engagement' between the reader and a woman artist's work (2006, p.78). However, her perspective makes me wonder whether it is necessary to argue that strategies of disruption originate outside of culture and outside of language. Can we not think of productive mimesis, for example, as a strategy of mediation that is an intrinsic part of social life? Could that not offer a more flexible, possibly more layered, understanding of society as a site where norms are constantly and individually negotiated depending on circumstances? As Jacqueline Rose suggests (1991/2013, p.149), is there not a risk of condemning the feminine to permanent unintelligibility when arguing that it originates from an *external* female subjectivity?

Psychoanalytic approaches should be taken into account and, certainly, cultural discourses shape our psychic reality insofar as we incorporate them into our sense of the self and our perception of the world. But it seems limiting to reduce *all* understanding of social life to a perspective that gives absolute power to patriarchal dynamics and discourses, when there is so much variation and complexity around us. Instead, the perspective I take in this research is that psychoanalytic insights play a role in shaping women artists' interactions and creative production, especially given how prevalent psychoanalytic discourse is in our culture. However, these insights

should not be used as a blanket explanation to read or account for all behaviours. To build on overdetermining Lacanian structures which are, on their own, too rigid, allows little room for agency. Truly, it is an almost impossible task to define what constitutes agency, to disentangle what might be choice from what might be more directly an effect of social dynamics. However, to interpret women's 'disruptive' practices as a result of their embodied multiplicity and excess fits too neatly into a cultural framework where only cohesive subjectivity has been produced as valuable. Life experience in itself may be fragmented, as we are torn between positions, roles and identities. Disjunction and multiplicity are not only conditions of the psyche, nor do they belong to women alone. Hence, I would argue that 'excessive' identities are better imagined as the effects of contested processes and practices through which subjects negotiate discursive constructions around them.

1.1.4 Sharing Experiences across Economic Divides and Women as a Class: socialist and historically grounded perspectives on difference

As much as it has attracted substantial feminist interest, I would argue that it is not difficult to see why numerous feminists and women, artists and scholars, have been hesitant to espouse a psychoanalytic approach to women's difference. The tendency of psychoanalytic criticism to argue that female subjectivity cannot be coherent given women's subordinate position in culture, can be alienating. It seems to offer no access to that form of individualised subjectivity commonly associated with cultural production. What it offers in return, a self that exists beyond language, premised on a body dismissed on the very grounds of its alleged incoherence, can be extremely unappealing. Nonetheless, this perspective is not the only one which seems to trigger such an ambivalent response. Women artists have in numerous cases rejected any critical feminism that foregrounds women's difference, because of what they imagine are the restrictions of adopting an essentialised identity or body. The notion of a universal creative subjectivity is still firmly anchored in the art world.

However, while some might argue that women artists who reject difference altogether erase structural discrimination, dismissing their contributions to the art world creates detrimental factionalisms. In her essay 'Issue and Taboo,' Lucy Lippard

brings into proximity women artists who prioritise political concerns and those who are invested in traditional notions of aesthetics and quality, to show how unhelpful such comparisons are for feminist politics (1984, p.140). Criticism pushes women either starkly to reject or to embrace feminism, while it also promotes categories of good and bad feminism. For Lippard, this factionalism is one of the main impediments to the success of feminist revolution in the art world and it can be countered with an analysis of class dynamics (p.140-141). Lippard advocates that women are a class because they share 'fundamental experiences' across economic divides (1977/1995, p.127). Thus, she argues that recognising this shared condition is the basis for challenging systems of value in the art world.

Lippard's position fits into what I described earlier as a socialist approach to women's difference. Like other feminist socialists around her, for example Martha Rosler, she postulates that idea that women's common experiences in historically and culturally located social groups connects them to each other. Lippard developed her views while working in New York in close contact with feminist art activism, Marxism and the women's liberation movement. And at the core of her writing is the argument that the art world creates a self-sustaining class system which places those who own art at the top, and artists, who produce it, at the bottom. Therefore, for Lippard, no matter what social class artists are born into, once in the art world, they are 'forced into a proletarian role' because they become dependent on those who control the market (1995, p.117). As a result, she argues, artists find themselves performing a 'schizophrenic role' where, on the one hand, they aspire to please those who hold positions of authority, while on the other one, they identify with 'workers' because of their precarious living conditions (p.118). Similarly, she claims, women are also positioned at the base of social hierarchies due to sexually oppressive patriarchal norms. This oppression links them together in what she calls a 'vertical class' (p.126). Accordingly, for Lippard, women artists are doubly subjugated, because they occupy both positions, artist and woman. She states that 'women daring to insist on their place in the primary rank —as art makers rather than as housekeepers (curators, critics, dealers, "patrons") — inherit a heavy burden of male fears [that of not succeeding] in addition to the economic and psychological discrimination rampant in money-oriented society' (p.123).

Lippard's work is moved by a democratising impulse to make art accessible and undermine the value system that creates hierarchies, schizophrenic positions, and the factionalisms I referred to earlier. She contends throughout her writings that women artists ought to provide a different set of standards for art, based on relevant social struggles. Lippard thus frames the artist's role as a responsibility. She argues that women must make their art socially relevant by incorporating in their artwork subjects and elements of their everyday life, so that it is relatable to 'all women' (1995, p.127)¹³. Furthermore, as Julia Bryan-Wilson has highlighted, Lippard also applied her strategy of redefining standards of value in art, to writing. Bryan-Wilson explains that Lippard connected the labour of artists, critics and curators through the collective identity she termed 'art worker' (2011, p.151). Hence, from Lippard's standpoint, feminist critics share with artists the responsibility to make women's issues and struggles visible through their work, as she did. Her own role as a single working mother, Bryan-Wilson explains, informed many of her 'anxieties' about labour, which found translation into her work (p.154). Thus, through her arguments and acting as a model herself, Lippard worked to establish potential connections between artists and critics, rooted in located gender experiences of the world – experiences which relate to particular socio-historical locations and cultural norms.

In my project, I am in sympathy with Lippard's proposal. I try as much as possible to develop such connections by tracing links between the women artists I work on and feminist critiques of women's roles. In addition, I also reflect on how my own position impacts the subjects I address in this research and how I analyse them. I agree with Lippard's argument that, as a critic and writer, I too seek to contribute to a different understanding of what living as a woman artist might be like. In the same way that Lippard suggests, I endeavour through this thesis to challenge notions of artistic identity which mask gendered difficulties women artists go through.

¹³ She lists a series of topics she considers relevant for women in a later essay. These include examples such as 'autobiography, images of the self, performance, [and] traditional arts' (1984, p.132).

Nevertheless, it is also necessary to acknowledge that the position Lippard sustains has often been accused of essentialism. It is true that at certain points, the language and terms she employs sound too definitive. In the same way, Lippard is rather deterministic when she looks for 'stylistic commonalities' among women on the basis of gender alone. Sentences like: as women 'we share the majority of our most fundamental experiences' come dangerously close to erasing disparities between women and different forms of oppression (Lippard, 1995, p.126). Her insistence on analysing the art world's class system and patriarchy as structures that create fixed roles makes it difficult to point out hierarchies among women in terms of race, or even in terms of class beyond the art world. Yet, in other areas of her work Lippard is not oblivious to positions different from her own. For example, Bryan-Wilson points out how Lippard was extremely active in the Ad hoc committee of women artists, which fought the underrepresentation of all women in the arts, particularly that of women of colour (2011, p.160). Such facts paint a complex picture of Lippard and the type of feminism she represents: a branch of socialist criticism that works in deep connection with activist movements.

Lippard's perspectives changed and evolved throughout the years she was involved in the women's movement (Bryan-Wilson, 2011, p.153; Lippard, 1984, p.126). By 1980, she had moved beyond making aesthetic assumptions about 'women's art.' However, she never abandoned the belief that women's art is different from men's. Lippard was wary of rejecting stereotypes which applied or had applied to women, because she thought that these constitute 'valuable aspects of our female identity' inasmuch as we participate in dominant culture whether we want to or not (1984, p.147).

Stereotypes do indeed form part of women's lives in an intrinsic manner. Women are, like everyone else, compelled to engage with them, no matter whether they ultimately reject or embrace them. However, Lippard neglects to make a pertinent distinction between *femininity* and *female* when talking about stereotypes. This distinction is incredibly important in the context of the art world, because in that space, femininity is not necessarily associated with women. In the art world, feminised notions such as *sensibility*, apply to the artist, which as I discussed earlier, is implicitly imagined as a man. Therefore, in the same way that the art world institutes

its own class system, it also redistributes gendered characteristics, creating an additional hierarchy where femininity is valuable. However, as I will explain by turning to Battersby in the next section and second part of this chapter, this system of value splits gender and sex, excluding women.

1.2 Approaching the Women Artist Otherwise: complementing deconstructive critiques with textual models of self-representation

Thus far, this literature review has offered a partial genealogy of feminist art history. I have been concerned with how and why the figure of the woman artist comes up or recedes depending on the theoretical frameworks being used. I have stressed the importance of her *presence*, particularly since theories that questioned authorship and stable identities in the 1990s led numerous feminist art scholars to move away from this subject. As I have noted throughout the first part of this chapter, I wish to draw on deconstructive and psychoanalytic approaches from feminist art criticism in my return to the question of how women experience their creative identity. These critiques have enabled me to problematise seemingly neutral and naturalised categories such as artist and woman. However, as Scott highlights, deconstructive criticism has also raised a challenge for feminist researchers such as myself, namely, ‘how do we authorize... new knowledge [about experience] if the possibility of all historical objectivity has been questioned?’ (1991, 786). Scott’s response to this problem is that feminists need to theorise experience precisely as a contested linguistic process through which subjects negotiate positions given to them, thus producing their identity (p.797). These positions are always and ever historically specific discursive constructions which can change as people dispute the terms that define them. What this means, applied to a project like mine, is that while notions such as woman and creative selves are powerful ideals that influence women artists’ lives, they *can* nonetheless be challenged at a discursive level. Previously, I stated that I am interested in how women artists can create space for themselves and defy assumptions attached to their social position. In the second half of this chapter, this literature review will explore feminist perspectives in the fields of philosophy,

and autobiography and memoir which theorise how women might textually mediate their experience through writing.

In the introduction to this chapter I noted that investigating the woman artist was a way of posing questions that have been central to feminists across a range of disciplines. It is insofar as identities are unstable constructions that the question of the woman artist is linked with questions of women as self-makers, more broadly speaking. In my project I argue that theories of women as *makers* of their own experience (such as those feminist studies on philosophy and autobiography offer) can be used to understand how women artists account for their lives, for their choices and their behaviour. I will show how in my project I have come to conceive of autobiographical narratives as a medium for self-constitution where creative women represent themselves, address the difficulties they go through in their lives as artists, and contest ingrained gender expectations. My research thus brings together insights from feminist approaches to self-writing and feminist art history's institutional critiques of the art world, creativity, and artistic identity, by looking at how women artists write about their experience of being artists. In the next section, I begin weaving these approaches together through Christine Battersby's work on creativity, gender and genius.

1.2.1 Gender and Genius: articulating women's subjectivities and challenging the art world's rhetoric of sexual difference through situated knowledges

I want to consider here the work of the feminist philosopher Christine Battersby. Her writing attends directly to the conceptual and practical challenges posed by the woman artist, as well as to the difficulties she faces as a historical subject. As I discussed earlier, poststructuralist perspectives in feminist art history, for example Parker and Pollock (2013) or Pollock (2003), expose how discourses create only certain roles for women in the art world. However, overall these perspectives concentrate on exploring artworks as texts, rather than attending to how women are shaped by ideas of artistic identity or gender. They centre on the meaning of objects rather than the meaning *for* subjects despite the fact that, as I have been stressing throughout this chapter, women share certain experiences through historically and

culturally located positions they embody. Parker and Pollock's reluctance to talk about women lies in the fact that we cannot presume the effects discourses have on subjects, nor can we know whether these effects are shared. However, in Battersby's opinion, we can hypothesise what it might have been like to be a woman artist at a particular point in time, insofar as women have had 'to confront [a common] rhetoric of social exclusion every time they tried to create' (1989, p.11). Battersby is aware that we cannot assume what the effects of sexist rhetoric are. But what she means in this statement is that, by tracking when the rhetoric emerges and how women artists negotiate it when it appears, we can begin to map how women received it.

Nonetheless, at this point I should mention that Battersby tracks both sexist rhetoric and women artists' responses in actual texts. Battersby's research materials are writings. She looks at philosophy essays, poetry, novels, art criticism, diaries and more, searching for passages where the authors discuss questions such as: what is an artist? Am I an artist? and other related issues. Hence, possibly, it would be difficult to apply her approach in a straightforward way to visual representation. But her arguments are immensely useful for my project because I too research texts. Furthermore, the question of artistic identity, in fact, comes up very often in women artists' autobiographical writings.

In addition, Battersby believes that feminist art historians ought to explore how women might have perceived themselves in the past, so that they can develop other standards to judge women's art (1989, p.10). Through these standards, feminist critics can establish parallel 'matrilineal traditions of cultural achievement' (p.10). She argues that to establish these standards, feminist critics need to be actively involved in a process of creative recovery. That is, they need to see their work as a feminist project which purposefully develops criteria for valuing women's art, and not feminine art. These values can create what she calls a 'feminist aesthetics' (1989, p.10). Thus, to the extent that she attributes an active role to the researcher when talking about 'women,' Battersby's proposal overlaps with other feminist approaches to difference such as Lippard's or Robison's. This goes to show how projects which stress women's difference are often aware that any statements on what that difference might be are shaped by the researcher's own position and political

objectives. This does not invalidate them. It locates them within social and historical contexts.

Despite this wider similarity with other research projects, I mentioned at the end of the last section that Battersby's approach to difference brings up one significant nuance that other projects do not. She contends that to investigate how women artists see their artistic selves, we first need to understand how dominant romantic discourses on artistic genius split 'femininity' from 'female.' Her project is built on the argument that, by separating gender and sex, dominant art discourses discriminate against women, while simultaneously valuing femininity, but only in men.

Earlier, drawing on Parker and Pollock, I elaborated how the category of artist relies on the ontological exclusion of non-male and non-white subjects (2013, p.xix). When Parker and Pollock present this argument, they align the figure of artist with man, but also with masculinity. In fact, throughout their research, they argue that 'the artist' is defined by masculine characteristics (pp.14, 80, 81, 114). But Battersby disagrees with this definition. She draws on texts from 1800s Romanticism onwards to illustrate how, while the artist figure refers to male creators, it embodies feminine characteristics. Thus, Battersby highlights how femininity, which is a burden for women artists, is an asset for men, because it carries the mark of genius. She traces further how the term genius became synonymous with artist, and then details how historical discourses argued that 'biological femaleness [mimics] ... the psychological femininity of the true genius' (1989, p.3). Battersby explains that as a result, it is not femininity but femaleness which is devalued in our culture and '[t]he great artist is [in reality, conceived as] a feminine man' (p.7). Conversely, for women, femininity is conflated with femaleness. It does not carry the same meaning or value. In this manner, gender becomes a difficulty when women hope to be recognised as artists.

However, Battersby also adds that femininity is not the only condition men required to become artists. She explains how Romanticism's discussions of creativity argued that the 'feminine psyche' of the artist had to be complemented by a 'male sexual drive,' so as 'to compensate for the essentially intuitive and passive nature of ... [feminine] working methods' (1989, p.40). Thus, by associating essentialised

characteristics with creative capacities, artistic discourses articulated a division between men as creators and women as passive sterile beings, rooted in their bodies. In fact, Parker and Pollock argue that when women managed to become artists despite structural discrimination, femininity was used to dismiss their achievements. They were treated as ‘artists who naturally tended to do slight things, like portraits, still-life, flower painting, or were congenitally weak in style, lacking invention, [and] favouring sensuous colour’ due to their ‘feeble’ sex (2013, p.xix).

The split between creativity and passivity is key to the logic of genius. Battersby states that through this gendered divide, women artists’ will to create has historically been pathologised and labelled as ‘misplaced female sexuality’ (1989, p.42). At the same time, both sciences and humanities rationalised women’s cultural inferiority by appealing to biologically essentialist arguments and theories that equated the female body with passivity. The rhetoric of genius drew on and reinforced a wider history of sexual discrimination by presenting women’s bodies as vulnerable to nature’s purpose (Battersby, 1989, p.5). In contrast, Battersby explains that the body of the male artist was seen as a source of energy, modelled on the image of God the Father (p.14). She shows how ‘genius’ discursively brings together the incarnation of patriarchal power, coming from ancient Roman traditions and the spirit of the universe as life-giving force, derived from Stoic cosmology (pp.57-59). These influences, she argues, materialise the genius figure, or artist, from a male body, and as a male archetype.

Battersby has sustained this argument throughout her academic career. In the symposium ‘We (Not I)’ which took place at the South London Gallery in May 2015, she argued that while the term ‘genius’ has fallen out of fashion, the rhetoric of discrimination remains alive in discourses of creativity. At the beginning of this chapter I pointed out how discussions of women’s authorship have dwindled in feminist art history. Conversely, Battersby is one of the strongest proponents that we need to continue addressing the question, because ‘we still live in a patriarchal culture... [where] it is male bodies and life-patterning that provide the template for what it is to develop a self’ (2013, p.23). Women are still not treated as full subjects. Hence, she argues further that:

[T]he feminist critic needs to concern herself or himself with analysing what is involved in writing as a woman: a person who has historically – and also does still – write and create within a cultural framework which treats male selves as typifying the human (2013, p.23).

What this means is that the very notion of subjectivity is linked with men's lives and bodies, because man is the model on which Western philosophy is built. It is not only about artistic identity, but also about the idea of human embedded in it. In her analysis of sexual dynamics and rhetoric, Battersby argues that philosophers have excluded features such as natality, physiological dependence, and fleshiness, from their definitions of 'identity, subjecthood and personhood' (2013, p.24). Thus, she suggests that by normalising this version of the human, Western metaphysics institutes a narrow model of identity which cannot accommodate what it is to live as a woman (p.24). However, women are in our culture encouraged 'to think of themselves as human.' Consequently, they are caught in between contradictory discourses which both encourage them to create and dismiss or chastise them when they do, by labelling them as 'abnormal' or 'extraordinary.'

Battersby's analysis of the human illustrates how women's subjectivity in Western history and culture is shaped and constituted by contradiction. These conflicting tendencies need to be taken into account when researching women artists and their cultural production. Nonetheless, according to Battersby, our aim as feminist critics should not be only to understand. Our final goal should be to 'reconfigure ("reconstruct") our models of identity in ways that would allow us to treat as normal the *female* (and, incidentally, the transgender) self' (2013, p.28). Dominant notions of subjecthood and humanity need to be broadened to encompass other bodies, other lives and other experiences. The first step is analysing how discrimination operates through concepts such as 'author' or 'artist,' which I would argue we can achieve by examining and analysing life narratives and strategies of self-representation by non-white, non-male subjects. The next step is to make 'subjectivity' more inclusive, which we can also do by exposing how people normally excluded by these categories use personal stories to articulate how they participate in them nevertheless. This is, as

Battersby argued back in 1989, a politically motivated feminist project by means of which researchers can create alternative ‘traditions of cultural achievement.’

Through Battersby we can recover essentialism not as an immutable category, but as that which ensues from ‘existence.’ Following De Beauvoir, she states that there is something ‘that *female* (and indeed also *human*) nature is at any given moment in history – even though what that nature “is” (its essence) will also be open to change’ (1989, p.29). In other words, woman’s essence is what she is encouraged to believe she is from a young age, as she is brought up in a particular context where norms around gender and identity operate. These are norms which are constantly reconfigured, redefined, through interactions, encounters, experiences, and a woman lives through and by them. Essence is, in this definition, that which emerges from our embodied existence as relational beings, but is mediated discursively. Marsha Meskimmon similarly conceptualises both artists and their work as historically located texts, whose ‘corporeal specificity’ is implicated in ‘relations, processes and practices through which’ they become meaningful (2003, p.3-4). Thus, she argues that we can read these ‘texts’ for how they articulate sexual difference. We can talk about women without recourse to ‘homogenous categories of alterity’ (p.2).

Of course, by reading meaning into texts, whether the text is an artist (subject) or her cultural production, scholars are involved in the process of creating particular, and always partial, knowledges. That is why feminist art history has always, and still is, conceived as an intervention. It coexists with dominant art history, although it does more than that. As Meskimmon states:

[A]knowledging the work of art as ‘theory,’ as a fully sensory mode of cognition, reinstates the power of particular, located, corporeal meanings to emerge in encounters with difference. In a dialogue with women making art, this move is extraordinarily productive, enabling us to ask how female subjectivity was and is articulated in visual and material form, what meanings might have been signalled by the making of art by women in diverse historical circumstances and what such works might permit us to think and know now (2003, p.6).

Through these words, Meskimmon builds a case to explore how women's artwork might materialise new, historically situated epistemes grounded on sexual difference. She suggests that artworks read as 'theory' can speak to us. They can tell us about female subjectivity, what the artist might have thought about herself, about the world: what is she telling us through that object, that text? Is it about her life, about what she knows, or about what she does? Our approach when reading is necessarily tentative. It is interpretation, but through that interpretation we can produce powerful, challenging stories that disrupt what historical discourses present as ultimate truth. We can create strong assertive narratives that disrupt patriarchal dominance in art history by interpreting the work of women artists. Strategies of representation and self-representation make an epistemological claim for recognition of female subjectivities.

I want to finish this section by suggesting that Meskimmon's proposal can easily be applied to actual writings. I would even argue that perhaps, in certain cases, it is easier to read what women's writing can tell us about female subjectivity, than it is to read art. Autobiographical writings in particular frequently and literally address the topic of *creating as a woman*. They discuss complexities which that position entails. Thus, my project, like Meskimmon's, theorises women's cultural production as materialised modes of cognition, open to and welcoming of feminist readings. In the next section, I discuss feminist theories on autobiography and memoir to see how women's self-writing has been conceptualised as a strategy to fight dominant expectations, widen gendered notions of subjecthood, and produce intelligible selves.

1.2.2 Feminist Studies on Autobiography and Memoir: reading women's writings and disrupting gendered norms of individualistic subjecthood

With some exceptions, the autobiographical subject of personal narratives no longer tends to be seen in isolation, as perhaps she or he might have been before feminist criticism. I would argue that, in fact, when examining how authors craft themselves, it is now central to acknowledge the role of interpersonal relationships. Writers shape

their textual selves through their connections, difficulties and tensions, both with people they are in contact with and the social context they inhabit. Hence, autobiographical writings are texts where the subject is both in conversation with and depends on her surroundings. Yet, such a seemingly self-evident argument was not always obvious.

Feminist and postcolonial interventions in autobiographical studies changed the nature of the field by stressing how written selves are in a dialogue with others and their environment. Furthermore, their critiques also encouraged authors and readers to recognise how textual subjects always represent partial and located experiences of the world. Hence, as feminist and postcolonial scholars began engaging with autobiographical studies, they challenged the hegemony of unified individualistic subjecthood dominant in this scholarship. Gender and English studies scholar Julia Swindells points out how theorists writing on the 'great tradition' of autobiography not only privileged man as an authoritative subject and norm, but also unproblematically assumed *he* was able to transparently account 'for his ideological environment and be seen to represent it,' as if no contradictions could influence *his* autonomous understanding of the world (1995, p.4). In this manner, studies of the Western European autobiographical tradition denied any biases or partiality in favour of an ahistorical transcendent rationality which they attributed to white men. Swindells adds that, in contrast, the same scholarship dismissed women, Black and working-class people's accounts of their lives, arguing that they spoke from the position of the personal (p.4). As a result, in a very similar way to feminist art history, feminist engagement with autobiography studies has critically questioned the epistemological foundation of the field. Feminism's main aim in performing this critique has been to contest exclusionary mechanisms at work in classic autobiographical theory. As Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield argue, feminist criticism has productively pushed us to reconsider the genre's underlying assumptions about 'subjectivity, knowledge and power, differences and collective identity' (2000, p.2). And feminist scholars began this endeavour by deconstructing and questioning the transcendent and unified autobiographical subject modelled on a male norm.

From the first feminist texts on autobiography and memoir, challenging the unified humanist autobiographical subject has been a central theme in feminist literary theory. However, the project was always fraught with tension, caught between the benefits of the autobiographical genre and the need to propose a more inclusive alternative. Modern English and American literature scholar Linda Anderson outlines how feminist critics have argued that, historically, autobiography's dominant 'politics of genre... [has followed] a patriarchal law which delegitimizes women's writing' (2000/2011, p.11). This implicit law polices the boundaries of *autobiography* and challenges women authors' authority by deriding the form and content of their narratives. However, Anderson argues that 'the writing of women, or perhaps of any subject who is deemed to be different, allows us to read back into genre the heterogeneity and transgressiveness it tries to exclude' (p.11). In other words, the autobiographical norm might work to discount women's contributions, but reading women's writing as autobiographical texts disrupts the dominant norm by exposing its arbitrary boundaries. Women's self-writing shows how women have indeed produced narrative accounts that adhere to the notion of 'autobiography' but also exceed its traditional conceptual boundaries. Thus, for feminism, questioning autobiographical studies' epistemological foundation is not simply about revealing how the genre institutes sexist dynamics and ideals. Challenging the conceptual basis of autobiography is also about developing strategies to explore how women have historically engaged with them.

A key question for feminist critics is therefore, not only how women might write autobiographies to create different subjects, but also *how we can read autobiographies differently*. Here is where the notion of the unified autobiographical subject looms. Feminist literary studies require that we address a core question: are we meant to explore how women draw on this model of subjecthood or should we reject it because it has traditionally discriminated against non-white and non-male authors? The issue is grounded in the same debates that surround the ideal of creative genius which I addressed in the previous section. If women have been historically excluded as subjects of literary creation – and they have – it seems understandable that early feminist studies reclaimed this position for them. Early feminist scholarship appropriated dominant notions of authorship for women

because the subject that lies at its core has great cultural value. Thus, feminist literary critics such as Elaine Showalter (1977/2008) or Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's arguments on creative women and 'the anxiety of authorship' (1979/2000, pp. 48, 49, 52), exemplify how women authors might have sought to approximate this model. At the same time, Showalter's and Gilbert and Gubar's position is contentious because it does little to challenge the intrinsic value of this ideal of subjecthood. They propose alternative female traditions. However, both of these studies argue that women aspire to 'authorship' in ways that can reify the value of a model that excluded them in the first place. And yet, Showalter's and Gilbert and Gubar's accounts also seem to suggest that, in appropriating this model of authorship in their writing, women writers changed its meaning. Because women introduced characteristics which the norm might have originally excluded, they adapted the norm to their needs.

For the same reason, autobiography has been a particularly alluring area of research for feminist scholars. Despite its history of exclusion, the genre promised to reveal an underlying female self which had been silenced by patriarchal discrimination. This idea is not unlike literary and artistic discussions around integrating women into the canon. Does studying women's autobiographies grant the authors a space which they had been excluded from before? And if that is the case, should women aspire to unified subjecthood? Or is it better to determine other standards of subjecthood to create an alternative tradition? As Anderson points out, it is also worth bearing in mind that certain autobiographical literary forms commonly associated with women, such as diaries and memoirs – like those I examine in this thesis – have not traditionally been granted the same status as *autobiography*. Anderson elaborates that the reason for this 'hierarchy of values,' is partly the fact that the looser structure of such texts has not been seen as conducive to the formation of the unified subject present in developmental narratives (2011, p.8). I would argue that these questions and historical debates make it necessary to detail carefully what we mean by unified subjecthood.

As I have stressed above, feminist scholars have frequently criticised unified subjecthood because in classic studies of autobiography the model evokes a transcendent universal subject. Nevertheless, unified subjecthood also refers to the

possibility of narratively crafting an account of one's life by means of which one's actions make sense in relation to the story. Cosslett et al. acknowledge that in composing herself through the text, the author needs to produce a story with which she 'can live in relative psychic comfort' (2000, p.3). What this means is that the author chooses what to include in her story, so as to portray a self that she is at ease with. As I will discuss in detail later, philosophers Judith Butler (2005) and Adrianna Cavarero (2010) both propose notions of 'unified subjecthood' which fit this definition and are extremely valuable for feminist scholarship. They talk about the autobiographical subject's need for coherence, but unlike the classical humanist subject, the models they offer do not make a claim for universality.

Hence, according to arguments such as Butler's and Cavarero's, autobiography offers women the possibility to reclaim control over their image, since they might use this genre to articulate their rationale and perspective, coherently but not universally. Furthermore, Cosslett et al. also contend that because women 'have been categorised as "objects" by patriarchal cultures, women's autobiography gives them an opportunity for them to express themselves as "subjects," with their own selfhood' (2000, pp.5-6). This claim is similar to Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson's suggestion that women's autobiographical narratives 'are engaged in an argument about identity' (2010, p. 50). Making visible how women conceive their lives, their stories articulate and challenge assumptions about what it might mean to embody their positions. Smith and Watson's words convey that writing about one's life is an open act of self-definition, which contributes to women's cultural presence and legitimises their subjectivities. Film and memory studies scholar Annette Kuhn, who writes about making visible social positions long unacknowledged, emphasises the benefits of sharing personal memories through autobiography (2002). She writes:

Memory work is a method and a practice of unearthing and making public untold stories, stories of 'lives lived out on the borderlands, lives for which the central interpretative devices of culture don't quite work.' These are the lives of those whose ways of knowing and ways of seeing the world are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in the expression of hegemonic culture. Practitioners of memory work might have conscientised simply through

learning that they do indeed have stories to tell, and that their stories have a value and significance in the wider world (2002, p.9).

In this passage, Kuhn shows that recalling our experiences and explaining in which ways they are meaningful to us gives value to our lives at an individual level. However, even more importantly, her words suggest that articulating life narratives which are 'rarely acknowledged' in our culture, reveals how history, social norms and relationships affect people differently, depending on their location in the world. Therefore, because these stories prove that 'the central interpretative devices of culture don't quite work' to explain everybody's experiences, they have an important role in redefining and broadening hegemonic categories, expectations and rules. Women, Black, queer and working-class people, all voice 'untold stories' which insist on dissimilar lived realities. They speak of other identities and other difficulties. Furthermore, Kuhn ventures that the *practice* of sharing these stories can also work as a form of consciousness-raising for those involved in the telling. It can make them aware of hegemonic culture's limitations, thus giving them arguments to contest its dominance.

While the conventions of autobiographical writing might seek to restrict what stories are told, feminists such as Kuhn demonstrate that the practice of sharing might enable us to counter these restrictions and move past them. She is persuaded that telling stories gives women the possibility to articulate textual selves which diverge from dominant narratives. Smith and Watson have similarly argued that life narration enables agency insofar as it creates diverging cultural scripts which challenge old forms of representation (2010, p. 45). Specifically, Smith and Watson take their cues on textual agency from postcolonial writing, stressing how these narratives have worked as an 'intervention... [against] colonial repression' (p.45). This fact is relevant because classical forms of autobiography, organised through the universal unified subject, have also worked to sustain the cultural hegemony of the West. Thus, gender, sex and race are intrinsically linked in the hierarchy that sustains Western white men's subjectivity as universal. Smith and Watson's argument highlights how feminist interventions in the field of autobiography ought to address the complicity of these positions. Furthermore, this argument also raises the need to explore how,

when white women have engaged in autobiography, they might have reproduced some of the genre's racist dynamics.

What all of these feminist perspectives have in common is that they maintain that women's autobiographical stories have power to challenge hegemonic hierarchies and discourses. Yet, critics working from a poststructuralist and deconstructive perspective might argue that exploring women's narratives is a self-defeating project. As a strategy, reading women's narratives for what they can tell us about women, buys into categories of identity which partake in the hierarchy, if only to produce woman as the other of man. However, literary critic Patricia Waugh highlights that 'those marginalized by the dominant culture [do derive] a sense of identity... [from] impersonal and social relations of power' even though this sense of identity is constructed and not 'natural' (1989/2012, p.3). For this reason, and despite the risks of essentialism that poststructuralism emphasises, feminist researchers, including myself in this project, have continued to engage with the subject of women's autobiography. Nonetheless, feminist scholars have been increasingly and rightly careful to avoid interpreting women's accounts as transparent representations of their lives. For example, theorists such as Laura Marcus (1994), Nancy K. Miller (1991, 2002) and Luisa Passerini (1996), whose work I explore later in this chapter, conceptualise women's autobiographical practices as rhetorical and performative sites – sites through which women legitimise behaviours and desires and create feminist connections and communities.

1.2.3 Feminist Criticism and/as Autobiography: personal narratives, agency, and reclaiming control over one's own image through storytelling

The question of women's autobiography has been a constant source of debate since it originated as a field of study, in particular regarding the kind of subject it postulates. When early feminist scholars tried to determine what is characteristic about women's narratives, what might make them different from men's, they turned towards concepts of relationality and multiple selfhood. Estelle C. Jelinek's 'Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition' (1980) was the first essay that argued relationality was a core feature of women's writing due to their more fluid

relationship with other women during their upbringing. Thus, Jelinek sustained that in comparison to men, women articulated more fragmented subjectivities in their autobiographical writing. To an extent, Jelinek was taking arguments from the ‘great tradition’ of male autobiography at face value. Anderson argues that it is not that men’s writing has ever been more structured than women’s, but rather, that it has been presented as such by early literary critics of autobiography such as James Olney (2011, p.5). However, as I stated earlier, men as much as women and anyone else, are influenced by their environment. And so, relationality is a condition of being human and living with others, not a characteristic of gender or sexuality. That is why, as Cosslet et al. detail, relationality has become more broadly seen as part of autobiographical studies as a whole – only that now, it comes under the guise of “intersubjectivity” – [which] is the ways in which all selves are structured by interactions with others’ (2000, p.7).

Hence, whereas early studies such as Jelinek’s contrasted women’s relationality with men’s structured selves, feminist critics of autobiography’s epistemological foundation have problematised these distinctions. Feminist criticism has come to show that relationality, now labelled intersubjectivity, is part of all personal narratives, although it might be more explicit in some than in others. And having moved beyond these distinctions, feminist criticism has increasingly focused on the uses of autobiography. It has sought to explore questions such as: what does autobiography enable women authors to say or do? And how does it help them navigate the social?

In light of these questions, personal narratives have been an immensely fruitful area of research because they can be understood as a tool through which a subject produces her identity. Mary Evans suggests that, by blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality, autobiographical stories construct the self rhetorically (2000, p. 76). Earlier I mentioned that while lives might be fragmented, narratives enable us to put order into them. They can provide unity insofar as they can rationalise disparate events and encounters through strategies useful for feminist theorising and living. Working from that point of view, Adriana Cavarero has argued that autobiographical

narratives are in fact always underpinned by the author's desire for ontological coherence.

In her book *The Desire For One's Story*, Cavarero explains that, by narrativising herself, the author is effectively living her life through the text (2000, p. 42). She understands herself as the subject of a textual account that relates her experience. Cavarero maintains that this connection between a person's identity and her story is bound by a relationship of desire. According to Cavarero, the narrative is desirable because it enables an individual to produce herself as a unique and unified being, which is what gives her ontological coherence. In the first place, the subject is individuated as the text brings her into existence. And in the second place, the narrative unifies and makes that textual self coherent by organising all the elements of the story around her (Cavarero, 2000, p. 33). Thus, the subject is individuated while also being completed through the narrative. Cavarero contends that, as a person, the author is always a narratable self, but the story confers a stable meaning to that self (p.33). Therefore, as she explains further, to desire the narrative is in fact to desire the unity of one's identity, as such unity is shaped by the consistency of the story.

Following Cavarero, I would argue that in a world where women might be pulled towards multiple attachments, the prospect of gaining ontological coherence through narrative storytelling is alluring. This is especially relevant in relation to those potential conflicts around artistic identity which I have been discussing throughout this chapter. Therefore, Cavarero's arguments are useful for my research. They suggest that placing a coherent fictionalised self at the core of a life narrative enables women to smooth out disparate elements which might trouble intelligibility. Against a model of universal unified identity, the type of ontological coherence which Cavarero proposes relies on the internal consistency of the story, not on the consistency of the subject in herself. As the narrative positions a subject's actions and behaviour within the logic of the story, tensions and contradictions are smoothed out. They all become an understandable part of the subject's textual identity.

However, it is important to keep in mind that the possibility for different narratives to emerge is limited by the institutional and social context that surrounds the subject.

Hence, while an autobiographical narrative largely produces a fictionalised self, that self retains a relationship with the reality that surrounds her. Judith Butler highlights two key elements which link a person's subjective self with her environment. These are her relationship to other subjects and to operating social norms (2005, pp. 7-9). Firstly, and as discussed above, women tend to engage in intersubjective processes when constructing their narratives. They produce themselves in relation to other subjects' identities. As Bridget Byrne argues in her work on narratives, the shapes their subjective selves take within the story rely on the person's empirical encounters with other subjects, who are perceived as affecting personal development (2003, p. 35). And secondly, narrativised selves come to occupy subject positions that are already available in the world. Butler's perspective builds on the idea that these positions exist as a set of already linguistically and socially constituted norms that govern social existence. Therefore, the individual does not invent roles. She integrates and negotiates identity positions that precede her. This can be defined as a project of subjection through which she fashions her identity with the aim of making herself recognisable to others.

What is most challenging but also promising about this perspective is that, while it is true that these two sets of relations affect women's conception of their subjectivity, that does not mean that women's narratives always take the form they *ought to* and respect social norms. Prevalent norms pose textual and ontological restrictions which are often challenged by women's accounts of themselves. Studying female characters in women's fiction, Nancy K. Miller shows that when women's descriptions of feminine experience do not match normative maxims, their stories are easily criticised as implausible and their voices are doubted (1981, p. 36). However, the risk of being questioned discourages but does not prevent women from putting forward their point of view. On the contrary, studying 'irreverence and rebelliousness in women's lives and in their narratives,' Luisa Passerini contends that women's autobiographical stories enable them to affirm subversive identities (1989, p. 189). Her work shows how women can use narrative storytelling to symbolically negotiate their social positions. Passerini observes that rationalising through their experience roles or behaviours that under common circumstances would have been considered inappropriate for them, helps women overturn traditional gender roles. Furthermore,

she infers that women's rebellious self-images 'can be of great help in transforming reality' as they legitimise new behaviours and desires (p.191). In my research, I have found Passerini's argument incredibly compelling. Her ideas underpin my approach to women artists' autobiographical narratives as I contend how the texts sometimes express resistant definitions of woman and of artist.

Generally speaking, what these critical perspectives suggest is that women's narratives draw attention to aspects of their personality which sustain an image of themselves they want to project. Through the work of Cavarero, I have detailed how autobiography might be motivated by a desire to assert individuality. In addition, Passerini's approach indicates that women's desire to legitimise and affirm their difference can strengthen the creative potential of narrative storytelling (1989, p. 196). Thus, she affirms that women's fictionalised selves work as a utopian force in which they invest their desire for change and validation. In this project, I bring Cavarero and Passerini's perspectives together to approach autobiographical texts as spaces of self-definition. This move enables me to suggest that women artists deposit images of themselves in their stories that work to authenticate their perspective. Ultimately, through these arguments, I conceptualise the process of storytelling as a form of emotional communication that women artists use to negotiate unconventional roles, perspectives and difficulties.

1.2.4 Academic scholarship on women artists' autobiographical practices

There is substantial scholarship on the subject of women artists' autobiographical practices in general. This is partly due to the fact that, as Griselda Pollock points out, critics have traditionally interpreted women artists' work in relation to their lives, no matter the content, whereas men's was often portrayed as a representation of universal principles (1999, p.106). On the other hand, with the exception of projects focusing on individual artists, very few studies have explored women artists' personal life narratives as a genre. Feminist art historians Wendy Slatkin (1992; 2010) and Mara Witzling (1991; 1994) have respectively published anthologies of women artists' writing. Responding to the early feminist call to produce 'corrective' histories, both define their projects as a way to make 'women's voices' heard and incorporate them

into the canon. In the preface to her collection, Slatkin, similarly to Passerini, maintains that there is agency in women artists' autobiographical writing, insofar as it is an open act of self-definition, which is furthermore transgressive, because the very process of writing for an imagined public redefines gender dynamics (1992, xi). Not dissimilarly, Witzling stresses how women artists might have used the writing to 'clarify pivotal life experiences' and seek validation when confronted with patriarchal hegemony (1994, p.10). In different ways, these two authors have been dubbed as essentialist for their take on womanhood as somehow inherent in the writing. Nonetheless, their belief that women artists have employed autobiographical writing to negotiate the obstacles of a patriarchal world is a principle I share with them in this project.

The work of Maria Tamboukou on women artists' 'auto/biographical' narratives (2010a; 2010b; 2010c) is a notable exception to the absence of scholarship dealing with this form. Tamboukou's project is, in terms of her objectives, the closest one to mine that I have been able to find. Just as I am, she is interested in exploring how women artists make sense of their lives and constitute themselves through their writing. However, her theoretical and analytical frameworks, the historical period she focuses on, together with her understanding of subjectivity and the work of patriarchal institutions, all differ from mine. In her main project, Tamboukou looks at narratives from women artists living in Paris at the turn of the twentieth century (2010b, p.11). She focuses on how this particular urban and social configuration, or as she calls it, drawing on the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari as well as Manuel DeLanda, this *assemblage*, brings together power relations and forces of desire that open up the possibility of *lines of flight* for women to become artists (2010a, p.685). Using the Deleuzian notion of *lines of flight*, Tamboukou means to produce a social ontology that charts how women artists departed from received notions of womanhood at this historical juncture, challenging the boundaries of femininity by living 'unconventional' lives.

Indeed, the selection of narratives that Tamboukou presents is representative of the process of gender 'deterritorialisation' which she claims for them, as all the artists she includes were born in feminist, radical and/or privileged families, which

encouraged their daughters in their uncommon artistic pursuits. As such, the authors of these auto/biographical texts often frame themselves as pioneers, to a large extent feeding stereotypes of artists as exceptional beings. In turn, the *heroic* tone of these writings enables Tamboukou to underline strategies of ‘resistance’ in the narratives – which is what she is most determined to record, because, in her view, resistance generates the possibility for other realities to emerge and challenge patriarchal norms (2010a, p.681). In this sense, as in numerous feminist projects, auto/biographical writing is a condition for political self-constitution in Tamboukou’s work. She conceptualises it as a Foucauldian technology of the self by means of which women can become other, merging imagination, desire, and aesthetics with the world they live in (2010a, p.693). Furthermore, drawing on Cavarero’s notion of ‘narratability,’ Tamboukou grounds the subject of the writing in reality, stating that it embodies the unique existence of the author, as the story materialises her desire to expose herself to others (2010b, p. 8). In addition, Tamboukou suggests through the work of Hannah Arendt – which is already present in Cavarero’s arguments – that it is also in this process of revealing herself to others through writing that the subject comes to actively participate in politics (p.8).

Tamboukou’s focus on ‘resistance’ addresses an important concern. However, her methodological use of *assemblages* as an analytical category makes it impossible to identify which ‘components’ enable or impede possibilities for *lines of flight* to develop. Everything Tamboukou says is that these possibilities do emerge, but not *how* they emerge or *what* brings them to the surface. Tamboukou is reluctant to attribute particular effects to institutions, discourses or cultural practices, because, based on DeLanda’s arguments, she maintains that the world is too complex for us to understand how individual elements in the *assemblage* might affect us (2010a, p.686). Thus, Tamboukou does not attempt to unpack the means through which institutions construct ways of being and living, and instead proposes ‘microsocial’ analyses of individual narratives where she finds evidence of resistance. Her ultimate interest is not in making a case for an institutional critique, but instead, in finding evidence of women artists ‘resisting what they are, by continuously becoming other’ (2010a, p.693). Here is where my project contrasts with hers most substantially. I understand that the combined effect of institutional discourses, material conditions, and

psychosocial desires and investments is extremely complicated to disentangle. Yet, I do aim to expose through my analyses how particular cultural practices and beliefs influence women artists. This is not to claim that encounters such as the ones I investigate in the following chapters always produce the same effects. However, it is to argue that these effects appear regularly enough in women artists' narratives to enable me to highlight how specific gender expectations and positions cause shared difficulties for women in asserting their artistic selves.

Therefore, although like Tamboukou I research how women artists create themselves through writing, unlike her, I firmly locate my project in a genealogy of gender studies and feminist theory on self-writing and representation which privileges woman as a political entity. In other words, I approach autobiographical writings paying particular attention to those instances where roles and positions women have traditionally been associated with appear. From there, I attempt to develop an understanding of how patriarchal structures cause shared difficulties that women artists have been forced to address in their lives - whether their response was to comply, to find a compromise, to deny them, or as in Tamboukou's case studies, to resist.

The concept of resistance is, for obvious reasons, particularly attractive to feminist researchers attempting to challenge gender discrimination and sexism in the art world. It is perhaps even more relevant in projects which investigate the strategies employed by women artists actively working within artistic circles dominated by men. This is for example visible in Susan Suleiman's research on gender and the avant-garde (1990/2012). Examining writing practices which often include an autobiographical component, Suleiman argues, as Slatkin does, that women artists' work demonstrates a double allegiance. It adheres to the 'formal experiments' and 'cultural aspirations' of the movements, but also to the 'feminist critique[s] of dominant sexual ideologies... [present in] those same avant-gardes' (p.xvii). The model that Suleiman uses to interpret women artists' feminist 'subversion' in their writing is that of the medusa, derived from Hélène Cixous, so as to rewrite the patriarchal text in the tradition of *l'écriture féminine*.

Suleiman explains that the medusa is radical because, whereas feminists sometimes reject mother figures due to their complicity with patriarchy, the medusa brings back the possibility of motherhood into feminism (2012, p.166). The medusa's subversive potential is based on the idea that, if a woman wants to be politically transgressive, it is up to her to transform the dynamics that surround traditional mother figures. Cixous' medusa is able to transform these dynamics as she rejects and laughs at the idea of horror and castration that she is supposed to represent (Suleiman, 2012, p.168). Following this metaphorical figure, Suleiman analyses the role of parodic intertextuality in the writing of feminist surrealist artists. She suggests that by appropriating old myths and stories and rewriting them with their own purposes, women artists can remake tradition, challenging and criticising patriarchal law (p.142). Suleiman takes the perspective that stories construe the real, and therefore, by rewriting them in humorous terms, women artists transform the world and assume autonomous subjectivity, remaking themselves in the process.

Suleiman's work stresses how exploring women artists' rhetorical and linguistic strategies of self-representation has great critical potential – especially as she also acknowledges her own reading practices in the project as feminist. Significantly, she mentions that among surrealist women artists, only Leonora Carrington was a self-proclaimed feminist (2012, p.144). Yet, that does not stop her from arguing that other surrealist women's work can be read through strategies of parodic intertextuality. By reflexively highlighting her own role, Suleiman exposes how her research results from a combined effort that incorporates the artists' writings and her own input as a reader or 'interpreter.' It is as if she were in dialogue with the authors – which is similar to how I understand my relationship to the writings I analyse in my research. Nevertheless, my research differs from Suleiman's in the details she highlights through her reading, and again, in her focus on 'resistance.' For Suleiman it is appropriate to search for traces of absurdity and parody in the writings, because she examines exclusively writings by surrealist women artists. And within the broader surrealist movement, humour is defined as a tactic of resistance against institutionalised structures and social practices. Thus, it is fitting for her to examine examples of parodic intertextuality because it is likely that such strategies of subversion are present in the texts she examines. The same cannot be said of

autobiographical writings in general. There is not a dominant strategy in terms of self-representation in the writings I study. Similarly, the authors I draw on do not always take an explicit stance against the art establishment or patriarchal systems. Therefore, while I do not exclude that there might be traces of humour and resistance in this project's examples, I do not systematically use these notions as a trope or explanatory framework to interpret women's words.

To focus only on women artists' written autobiographical practices creates boundaries that are perhaps less defined in the world around us than they are in my project. Cosslett, Lury and Summerfield state that autobiographical practices in the present have expanded to include 'many different written, spoken and visual genres, such as application forms, interviews and family photographs' (2000, p.1). In the context of the art world, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson theorise with an equally broad perspective women artists' autobiographical 'acts.' Indeed, their essay 'Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual Textual Interfaces' (2002) could be seen as a preface to countless and varied projects on women artists' self-referential art practices which go beyond writing. The scope of the materials they cover is broader than mine as they productively bring together women artists' strategies of self-representation taking place at the 'interface of image and text.' Yet, certain aspects of my project do overlap with theirs. For instance, much like them, I am interested in how the performative act of representing oneself might grant authority to women artists *as artists*. To that extent, the projects we are engaged in are not so different. Additionally, like Smith and Watson, I too draw on autobiographical theory to analyse the rhetoric of self-representation women artists deploy in their writing.

However, by highlighting these similarities I want to bring into focus why, unlike Smith and Watson and numerous other studies, I mostly do not include women artists' visual practices of self-representation in my research. I only draw on images or artworks in marginal cases when there is a direct connection between these and the texts – for example, Dorothea Tanning's painting *Birthday*, which is explicitly discussed in her memoir. Although Smith and Watson show that analysing visual and written works together can be fruitful, autobiographical writings do not always have the same *status* for the artists that produce them than that their artistic work does.

Focusing on self-writing alone gives me a chance to examine the rhetorical possibilities it grants women artists, independently from of their artistic production. It is true that at times there are interesting overlaps between artists' creative work and their autobiographical writings. Nonetheless, at other times, the writing comes later, as a slower process through which women artists *reflect on* art making – and it is in this capacity that I am interested in the works included in this project.

Conclusion

Throughout the second part of this chapter I have tried to show how feminist theorising has influenced autobiographical studies. I have discussed how feminist interventions have made scholarship on autobiography and memoir more inclusive by challenging the dominant model of autonomous subjecthood, even when women authors have sometimes used it to define themselves. The chapter has also detailed how feminist interventions have broadened understandings of textual subjectivity, stressing the subject's relationship to her environment. In addition, it has explored how women might use writing to negotiate their social context and roles, helping me to conceptualise how autobiographical texts can be interpreted as sites where women craft images of themselves. I have ended with a review of feminist scholarship on women artists' autobiographical narratives, to highlight where this research departs from other projects similar to mine. In light of the first part of this chapter, where I discuss women's relationship to their creative identity, feminist studies on autobiography have given me a basis for studying the difficulties women might experience in their lives as artists. My intention in this chapter was to bring together these two bodies of feminist theorising, so as to show how they have informed my project. As such, I do not hope to offer an account of *all* theories present in these fields, but rather, to map the main trends and demonstrate how my project builds on and sits among them.

Chapter Two: methodology

2 Introduction

In this thesis I am interested in how women artists confront prejudices and dominant expectations attached respectively to gender and creative roles, such as those I examined in my literature review. Thus, one of the primary concerns of this project is to unravel how woman, femininity, artistic identity, and greatness operate in society, engendering particular difficulties in women artists' everyday lives. I want to explore how women artists have developed methods to come to terms with these figures, and understand and communicate their experience. As I was mapping the trajectory of the woman artist through various academic histories, I realised that my research challenge was to find a way of approaching the woman artist without assuming any simple access to her interiority. In this chapter, I outline the way I framed and used autobiographical writings to address this dilemma.

The first part of the chapter outlines the rationale I followed in composing my literature review. I detail how the range of sources I examine serves as a foundation for building an initial image of the woman artist. Then, I explain how, drawing on Nancy K. Miller's work (1991), I use the concept of 'personal criticism' to interpret autobiographical writings as acts of criticism. In the second part, I turn towards the twofold role of space in the thesis. I describe how, on the one hand, I employ space as a structuring tool to organise the chapters. At the same time, I examine how space – particularly domestic space – features as a subject of analysis. Additionally, I reflect on how visual artists' need for space might differ from that of writers. In the third part, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of archives. I lay out how, by bringing formally different texts together in this research, I engage in a process of narrativization through which I craft a story about women artists and their difficulties with inhabiting their creative selves.

2.1 Rationale: theoretical positioning and framing

My initial research aim in this project was to find out and unpack how certain practices, images and expectations were affecting women artists, in what I saw as fundamentally negative ways – or, if not negative, then at least problematic ways. I initially intended to use biographical documentaries on women artists to analyse how they represented women artists. I was interested in how documentaries offered women artists' images as models of personhood which the public could use to recognise with aspects of themselves. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall (1996; 1997) and David Marshall (1997) on celebrity studies, I aimed initially to explore how images are able to create models of identity that can function as sources of knowledge about the self. However, I soon realised that although documentaries could inform me about the most widespread stereotypes of women artists, they could not tell me how women themselves related to those stereotypes. I turned instead to autobiographical writings as a means to investigate how women artists had used narrative storytelling to represent themselves. Autobiographical writings would allow me to reflect on how women employed these representations to mediate between themselves and the world around them.

2.1.1 Choice of Theory in the Literature Review: situating the project

Whilst I was considering what would be the most appropriate medium to address my research question, I began reviewing existing literature on the figure of the woman artist. I realised, as the previous chapter shows, that there is no single body of theory which attends to the idea of woman as artist. Rather, she appears as a subject across different disciplines, including, for instance: feminist art history, feminist art theory, philosophy, and literary and autobiographical studies. Although profoundly different, all of these perspectives seemed, to a certain extent, to have contributed to the formation of the most widespread images used to represent women artists. Thus, I felt it was crucial to reflect the existence of these various perspectives when establishing the foundation of this project. Accordingly, in the literature review, I followed the figure of the woman artist across these various disciplines, examining how she has been conceptualised from a diverse range of feminist perspectives. A

consequence of this method is that I have prioritised gender roles and gendered expectations as an object of research over a more contextual discussion of each artist's specific environment. This decision has both advantages and disadvantages. While it would have been beneficial to give a lengthier account of the three artists' social context, I felt it was more important to examine those histories from which the figure of the woman artist had emerged. Frequently, figures seem to acquire an iconic status. They appear as if devoid of history. However, figures owe their current shape to history. Thus, in my literature review, I attempt to give an account of the complicated and layered history which has produced the present figure of the woman artist. Feminist geographer Doreen Massey explains in relation to national identity and place that a sense of identity is the result 'of layer upon layer of interconnections with the world beyond' (1994, p.8). A figure's identity, as that of a subject's, is in this manner construed over time as it incorporates formerly alien elements through social relations. This unavoidable process, Massey adds, forces us to look back upon the past if we want to fully understand the current shape of an identity.

It is in a way similar to what Massey describes that I have endeavoured throughout this project to explore how historically shifting notions of gender and artistic identity have accumulated as strata, developed, and ultimately shaped contemporary understandings of the woman artist. Specifically, I have focused on the form these identities have taken in relation to space.

2.1.2 Interpretation and Conceptual Framing: women artists' writings as 'personal criticism'

This thesis is broadly divided in two parts. As I have detailed, in the first part, I engage with scholarly writings around the woman artist. In the second part, or what I call my analysis, I perform a reading of three sets of writings, focusing on one autobiographical piece in each case. It is important to clarify, though, that I do not mean to establish a hierarchy between the two genres, scholarly and autobiographical. On the contrary, I contend that women artists' autobiographical

writings have contributed to shaping the figure of the woman artist as much or perhaps even more than theory texts have. Although they function differently from scholarly writings, each of the autobiographical accounts I interpret here, influences how we might define the or a woman artist as much as any academic source does. Different genres vary in their strategies. But as Rita Felski states in *Literature After Feminism*, in writing, like in other spheres, questions of gender cut ‘across the very distinctions between public and private worlds’ (2003, p.11). In line with this argument, my underlying point is that what it means for an author to inhabit a gender identity, is manifest in her writing, whether the author engages in theoretical reflection or whether she writes about her life. Specifically, I develop this argument further through the notion of *personal criticism* which emerged in feminist literary theory in the 1970s.

As a term, *personal criticism* was coined in the 1990s with reference to Nancy K. Miller’s 1991 *Getting Personal* and Mary Ann Caws’ 1990 *Women of Bloomsbury* (Anderson, 2011, p.127). Nancy K. Miller’s work has been the most influential in conceptualising my approach to women artists’ autobiographical writings as *personal criticism*¹⁴, particularly where she builds on Jane Tompkins’ 1987 essay ‘Me and My Shadow.’ Conceptualising women’s life stories as *personal criticism* enables me to place autobiographical writings in conversation with the theory I examine in the first part of the thesis. Feminist scholars openly present their writings as acts of criticism. Through the concept of *personal criticism* I see authors of autobiography as another type of critic.

In her essay on personal writing, Jane Tompkins draws on the work of Alison Jaggar (1996) to suggest that the division between the personal and the academic institutes a hierarchy between modes of knowledge that undermines ‘women’s epistemic authority’ by excluding emotion (1987, p.170). Tompkins underlines how conventions that define legitimate sources of knowledge overlap with gendered conventions that

¹⁴ While in this project I have drawn on proponents of *personal criticism*, this perspective has had many detractors. Both positions are represented in the 1996 *PMLA* Forum article on the character and limits of the personal in academic scholarship, ‘The Inevitability of the Personal.’

attribute rationality to men and emotion to women, consequently producing both women and the personal as unreliable (p.170). In response, Tompkins' self-positioning is that the personal is an equally legitimate source of knowledge because it is grounded in the way we engage with the world. In this manner, Tompkins used the personal in her academic work to undermine epistemological conventions which had excluded her as a woman.

Miller's work has been especially important in my project, particularly where she takes Tompkins' argument one step further by asking us to reflect on the 'effects' of autobiographical writing (1991, pp.1-2). Miller suggests that, as a feminist practice, *personal criticism* 'entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism... [that involves] a deliberate move towards self-figuration' (1991, p.1). She argues that the power of this gesture lies in the fact that self-exposure facilitates engagement (1991, p.24). According to Miller, self-exposure opens up the writing to the reader who then becomes able to draw strength from the author's story to assert herself. Furthermore, Miller adds, in performing her story so that others can recognise their difficulties in hers, the writer makes herself vulnerable. She puts herself at risk 'in the fabulation of self-truth, that what is at stake [for her] matters also to others' (1991, p.24). For Miller, the possibility of recognition and potential community formation makes this risk worth taking. She encourages feminist critics towards self-exposure in the hope that, by performing the personal, authors and readers might come together.

In this thesis, I employ Miller's arguments on *personal criticism* to frame women artists' autobiographical writings as a form of criticism. If, as Miller says, what matters is the 'effect' of personal narratives, then women artists' projects of self-representation accomplish a task akin to that of the feminist critic who draws on her life to reflect on social relations. Following this reasoning, my analysis highlights how women artists' writings articulate concerns or issues that numerous other women artists might experience. As in Miller's description, self-exposure enables them to show how troubling certain incidents can be and to recount how they faced them. By means of personal storytelling, women artists share their struggles as they figure themselves on the page. Miller herself blurred

distinctions between personal criticism and other forms of autobiographical writing in her later work. Much as I suggest here, she stated that ‘memoir [too] is the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in the postmodern world’ (2002, p.14). In this spirit, I interpret Tanning’s, Carrington’s and Ringgold’s writings as a type of performance through which they represent how they see themselves as they reach out towards the reader.

2.1.3 Theory as Foundation Vs Theory as a Tool of Interpretation

There is another distinction in this thesis between the theory I examine in the literature review and that which I employ in the analytical chapters. As I mentioned, the theory I place in the literature review takes the woman artist as a subject of enquiry. This scholarship enables me to build a general image of the woman artist figure which I later enrich through my interpretation of Dorothea Tanning’s, Leonora Carrington’s and Faith Ringgold’s personal writings. However, within each chapter, I use more contextually specific scholarship on women’s gender roles in the domestic to perform a close reading of these three artists’ personal narratives. For example, my use of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (2011) at the start of the chapter on Leonora Carrington illustrates how I employ gender studies scholarship differently within the chapters. I argue that this classic feminist text speaks directly to the socio-economic condition from which Carrington emerges, and is therefore particularly suitable to tease out the kinds of femininity the artist represents in her stories. Similarly, in the chapter on Faith Ringgold, I draw on American Black Feminist scholarship from the 1970s and 1980s because Ringgold’s memoir raises concerns with family life which are explicitly addressed in this body of theory. Furthermore, Ringgold herself participated in the Feminist Movement as a vocal activist, thus directly influencing some of the concerns Black Feminist scholarship put forward. Whereas in the literature review I sought breadth, in the case studies, I aim for detail. I narrow my conceptual focus in order to explore how each autobiographical text brings into being a singular image of the woman artist. In this manner, I seek to highlight how the notion of woman artist that transpires in autobiographical narratives is representative of ordinary concerns but also unique to its author. In each

of the texts, the artist's individual persona coexists with historical layers which connect her to a broader image of the woman artist.

Women artists' projects of self-representation may not have started with the singular aim to underscore gender dynamics. However, the nature of the subject they address – their everyday as both women and artists – paired with the genre they employ, allows me to trace feminist connections between them and explore how autobiographical writings add layers to the figure of the woman artist. Insofar as these authors take issue through their narratives with the institutions that produce difference and discrimination, they perform a type of *personal criticism*. Their stories blur the distinction between academic and personal writing by articulating powerful social critiques derived from their experience. In the following section, I detail how my process of interpretation relies on how space materialises in these three artists' stories.

2.2 Domestic Spaces: structure and subject of analysis

I approach autobiographical texts in this research by exploring how Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold represent everyday life experiences related to gender expectations attached to the spaces they inhabit. Space is thus relevant to this project for both its material properties and for its figurative qualities. In this section, I explain how space features in the thesis both as a structuring tool to organise my three case studies and as a trope that these three artists employ to navigate the complexities of creative life.

The subject of space in general appears frequently in women artists' autobiographical narratives as the literal environment through which the protagonists develop but also, crucially, in relation to discussions of identity. Because of the prominence of this topic, I use space as a thread throughout my three case studies to connect these examples to one another. That is, I start each chapter by reflecting on the significance of a specific space for each of the authors I have chosen, respectively the artist's studio, the patriarchal household and the artist's home. As the chapter unfolds, mirroring how the texts I examine also unfold, I analyse how those original spaces

acquire new meanings. In the process, I trace the trajectory that each artist traces for herself as she writes herself into existence through the narrative. As each location brings its own difficulties, I explore how grappling with space becomes a strategy to grapple with gender.

2.2.1 Women Artists, Space and Gender

I could have used elements other than space to tie these three examples together. However, space, especially domestic space, is loaded with implications about women's roles and duties that, as I aim to show, can be problematic for artistic self-making. Conversely, public space is gendered and racialised in ways that might make it at times an inhospitable environment for many women artists. As Doreen Massey repeatedly stresses in her work, space is integral to social relations (1994, p.2). In her work, she describes how space both engenders and is shaped by positions occupied by those who inhabit it. As a result, she maintains, space is profoundly 'tied up with, both directly and indirectly, particular social constructions of gender relations' (p.2). Following these thoughts, I suggest that whether discussions of personal space in autobiographical writings lean towards more or less positive associations, the importance of space in women artists' textual self-representation cannot be overlooked. Furthermore, space is not only entangled with culturally dominant gendered positions; it is also a profoundly individual experience. For, as Massey also highlights, social positions are imbued with differential amounts of power that uniquely influence how a person perceives space (p.3). Accordingly, there are as many spaces as there are individuals situated at a particular crossroads between multiple positions. These arguments have led me to take discussions of space as central when interpreting both an author's position and her words.

As a whole, space is gendered and sexualised in ways that profoundly influence or trouble how women might define themselves. Architecture scholar Mark Wigley explains that discourses around architecture have naturalised and spatialized gender, instituting distinctions later reproduced in other fields (1992, p.329). Wigley points out that as far back as Alberti's fifteenth-century writings, historically, the home or family house has been the core organising space through which women have been

controlled and ‘domesticated’ (p.332). With this comment, Wigley does not only seek to convey that the house enforces gender differences by imposing roles. He also means that the house makes material and psychological demands on those who inhabit it through which it shapes and genders the occupants’ sense of self (p.334). Consequently, while not everyone experiences their domestic environment in the same manner, the actions a person undertakes in their house impacts how they understand who they are.

One of the key premises I sustain through my analysis is that the traditional domestic space rhetoric by which women are expected to perform responsibilities of care has troubling effects on women artists who carry out their creative work in the home. Given that domesticity and artistic identity have traditionally been defined in opposition, I examine how the spatial proximity of these roles in the domestic household might be complicated. When reporting on her interviews with professional women artists, feminist social geographer Alison Bain describes how those who work in their home are unprotected from interruptions by family members whose domestic demands can compromise the artists’ creative selfhood (2004, p.184). Based on her research, Bain concludes that having a dedicated space free from these disruptions – such as a studio – reinforces women artists’ ‘sense of commitment and belonging to a predominantly male-dominated profession’ (p.171). However, such as for the three artists I examine in this thesis, this scenario is not always a possibility. Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold did not have a separate workspace. Thus, as Wigley indicates, and as I will explore in my analysis, domestic space influenced their self-perception, although with very different results from one another.

2.2.2 Differences Between Visual Artists’ Spaces and Writers’ Spaces

It is important to highlight that I treat a visual artist’s need for space as distinct from that of women working in other creative professions. In the previous chapter I drew extensively on feminist literary theory. Here I want to clarify the difference between women visual artists’ need for space and women writers’ need for space. To an extent, there is much that connects visual artists and writers. As I indicated earlier, popular notions of creative genius and autonomous subjectivity have been used to

discriminate equally against them both. Both also share a need for contemplation (bell hooks, 1995, p.636) and often undertake their labour in stolen moments of time (Adrienne Rich, 1994, p.42) which seem to take them away from their families. However, producing visual art involves different material conditions than writing does. Visual art is more financially costly and tends to require a roomier physical space. Due to this commonplace requirement for a larger space, visual artists might become hyper-visible when at work, as they are more likely to be exposed to other people's presence and criticism. This distinction between visual artists and writers might break down when a writer publishes her work. Publishing makes a writer extremely visible. But the form of the initial creative endeavour nonetheless separates visual artists and writers. Lily Briscoe's predicament in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927/1992) can help illustrate this point. Standing by her easel, Briscoe is haunted by Charles Tansley's words 'women can't paint, women can't write' (p.67). This statement would be likely to rouse similar insecurities in a visual artist and in a writer. However, it is significant that the moment Briscoe feels most exposed comes when she is in the garden with her canvas in plain view. Her painting's potential faults make her feel conspicuous. They make her feel susceptible to the judgement of any person who might walk in on her. In contrast, the writer's creative endeavour is often more private. She writes at her desk, in her room, or in her house. But even if she is working in a public place, there is comparably little chance of anyone openly observing what she is working on. It would be inappropriate to read what might be a personal document. No one comes to peer at Mrs Ramsay's writing when she is busy with her correspondence, whereas anyone passing by might comment on a visual artist's work. The distinct way a visual artist occupies space thus raises a specific set of concerns which are exclusive to her creative persona. Based on these similarities and differences, in this thesis I sometimes draw on literary theory to discuss shared subjects, such as authorship, but mostly I focus on the woman artist as a visual artist. I use autobiographical writing to explore the specificity of her experience and the places she occupies.

2.2.3 Connecting Space's Material and Figurative Properties

In my analysis of how space works as an object through which women artists define their identity, I am especially inspired by Diana Fuss' interpretative strategy in *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms that Shaped Them* (2004). In her approach, Fuss breaks down common binary distinctions between the conceptualisation of space as a *literal* entity in architectural studies and that of space as a *figurative* entity in literary studies (p.3). Echoing Massey, Fuss argues that material and subjective space work in tandem (p.4). They exist in a dynamic relationship in which they inform each other as they become the stage where the author performs certain tasks and interacts with those closest to her. The literal environment changes in relation to how it is perceived, and conversely, what we feel about that space depends on the actual material possibilities or difficulties it engenders. Consequently, Fuss stresses that the events that take place under the domestic roof encourage the writer to experience this space in connection to the roles and positions she assumes. The space acquires subjective qualities that might make it seem comforting or not, welcoming or not, distressing or not. For example, in nineteenth-century novels by women writers, the domestic often appears as a metaphor for confinement, due to the patriarchal restrictions numerous women were subjected to. At the same time, Fuss' work also highlights that space itself becomes autobiographical in that it comes to carry the mark of those who occupy it (2004, p.1). The author's domestic space is shaped by rituals and routines grounded in the materiality of her daily life. Thus, the way the author interacts with the space around her imbues it with certain qualities.

Building on the mutually constitutive dynamic between space and author, Fuss defines domestic space as both a place and an instrument to shape the imagination. This thought leads her to argue that because the space an author occupies shapes her sense of interiority, the way a writer describes that space in her writing 'opens a window onto both author and text' (2004, p.2). In this manner Fuss indicates, as I have been suggesting in this section, that paying attention to the meaning that personal domestic space holds for an author is both a way into the author's world and into the place the author occupies in that world.

Fuss' methodology is therefore relevant for my project because the spaces in which women artists' everyday lives develop are linked to the difficulties and possibilities that emerge in their lives as artists. In fact, as I will discuss further in the following chapters, I want to suggest that discussions of space in the three pieces of autobiographical writing I focus on have the ability to engender new life possibilities. Their authors open up new possibilities for themselves because, in Massey's terms, 'challenging certain of the ways in which space and place are currently conceptualized implies also... challenging the currently dominant form of gender definitions and gender relations' (1994, p.3). Thus, I suggest that by portraying or redefining space in their own terms, Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold employ space as a strategy to re-draw their personal position. In this manner, I understand descriptions of space as intrinsically political, as they can challenge the order of gender relations. They have the ability to disrupt the traditional polarization between public and private, and male and female space.

Tanning's *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001) is a personal account which registers an absorbing yet common process of transformation for women artists which is linked to changes in the author's working environment. I begin my analysis of this memoir in her apartment, at a point in the text where the place in which Tanning originally lives alone, doubles as her studio. I then trace how, just as she starts gaining professional recognition, the space changes. I pursue these thoughts further by exploring how the patriarchal household appears in Leonora Carrington's stories as an instrument to discipline and contain young women's freedom and creative desires. I interpret the artist's symbolic imagery by focusing on how her young protagonists reject restrictions and expectations attached to their position by rebelling or running away. I finally turn to *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995) to explore how, despite gendered connotations and expectations that oppose artistic identity, the domestic might not always be the enemy of women artists. The status of domestic space also depends on the struggles women face *beyond* that space.

With their eloquent discussion of intimate spaces, these three pieces of writing are especially suitable to explore how domestic encounters and situations pose complex

demands upon women artists. To investigate how they take up certain domestic or familial roles, resist, or simply persevere in a different direction, I follow the artists' movements through text and through space. Once a character engages me with her words, I register her movements through space and on the page whilst asking the text: where does she begin and where does she end up? Who is she where she starts and who is she where she ends up? I follow Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold from room to room, into and outside of houses, walking through gardens, and into the comforts of family life. I follow them where they take their stories, because as the space around them changes, so do they, adjusting to the ability of their context to shape how they are perceived.

2.3 Turning Research Materials into an Archive: new narratives and limitations

There is more to the three narratives I have chosen than what I make of them in this thesis. By privileging discussions of space and gender, I may have overlooked other subjects which were potentially meaningful to the authors. I also considered and rejected other ways of situating and interpreting the texts. In this section I acknowledge the gap between my original research materials, which were produced independently from one other, and my use of them in this project as an archive. Starting with Carolyn Steedman's reflections on the 'archive,' through the following paragraphs, I explain how I bridged this distance. Simultaneously, I outline the consequent limitations of my research and then conclude the chapter.

2.3.1 Creating a Story to Reflect a Social System

To designate a series of objects as an 'archive' is to establish a commonality between those objects. Thus, to use this label may seem to suggest that the texts I draw on share certain intrinsic features. However, this assumption is not exactly accurate. Rather, it is the very act of naming my materials an 'archive' which brings into being these texts *as* my archive. I forge a commonality between the texts by focusing my analysis only on certain aspects of the texts. This rhetorical gesture allows me to

bring together, for instance, texts of such different character as Carrington's stories and Ringgold's memoir.

In her book *Dust* (2001), Carolyn Steedman draws on Jacques Derrida's method of deconstruction to argue that, prior to the researcher's mediation, the materials of the archive do not exist in the form in which the researcher presents them. She explains that, to a certain extent, research materials are inert until we pick them up for the purpose of producing knowledge. Steedman argues that until that moment, '*nothing happens to this stuff, in the Archive*. It is indexed, and catalogued, and some of it is not indexed and catalogued, and some of it is lost. But as stuff, it just sits there until it is read, and used, and narrativised' (2001, p.68). This was the situation in which I found my materials and from which I developed my arguments. Unlike other archival materials, autobiographical writings do possess an internal narrative. However, the texts contain more than this narrative. Each autobiographical text is in itself a world brimming with infinite elements. This understanding oriented how I approached Tanning's, Carrington's and Ringgold's writings when performing my analysis. I conceived each autobiographical text not as a self-contained object but in a way, as a smaller individual archive wherein the textual selves or figures the writings propose, the experiences and impressions they relate, words, patterns, and topics, all 'sit' on pages – like Steedman's 'stuff' metaphorically 'sits' on shelves – waiting to be used. From there, I worked somewhat backwards, using the textual detail to connect one personal story to another in order to form a wider picture.

The process by which I give certain textual details a new life in this project has two significant consequences. The first one is that I necessarily overlook other subjects present in the autobiographical texts. The second one is that, by examining only certain elements, I frame the whole project, giving it its distinct character. Together, these features establish the boundaries of the thesis. From the elements I selected as I was reading through the texts, I created an independent narrative that seeks to reflect situations that have confronted women artists in their everyday lives. I built on bits and pieces, scenes and descriptions, feelings and events, 'to', in Steedman's words, 'conjure a social system from a nutmeg grater' (2001, p.8). In particular, I paid attention to descriptions of domestic space because, as I discussed earlier, this space

imposes gendered forms of labour that impact how and when women can make art. Tracing thus how women artists conceptualise and move through domestic spaces allowed me to offer an account of the 'social system' that shapes their lives and self-perception. In this manner, by bringing together particular details, for instance, how Tanning loses her space to her lover's belongings and how Carrington represents her rocking horse as a source of freedom, I built the project's overall framework to tell a story about gender dynamics, creative production, and space.

If instead of focusing on gendered interactions and domestic spaces, I had centred on, for example, Ringgold's discussions about quilt-making, I could have traced other connections and derived other arguments. I could have considered this discussion alongside, say, Anne Truitt's diary entries about polishing her wooden sculptures, and argued that women artists employ their writings to resolve technical issues in their art. Focusing on writings exclusively has also led me to ignore other interests these artists might have held. For instance, when I visited the Dorothea Tanning retrospective at Tate Modern in February 2019, I realised how a great number of her paintings addressed the subject of motherhood. Artworks are indeed excellent vehicles to convey ideas. The subject of motherhood seems to have been an important interest of Tanning's. However, as with probably many others subjects I overlook within or beyond the texts, I decided not to explore this subject because I chose to centre my analysis on writing as a deliberate and explicit act of self-portrayal. The fact that I found gender dynamics to be a pressing concern in the texts I analyse, responds both to the texts and to my own personal concerns as a researcher. However, I trust that this choice does not compromise the validity of my argument, nor does it disqualify other readings as the potential for different interpretations lies within the texts.

2.3.2 Narrativisation: reinterpreting women artists' accounts

The method of interpretation I employ in this research, returning to Steedman's phrasing, is best described as a process of narrativisation through which I construct a story different from the ones that the artists' writings propose. However, it is important to add that this metanarrative remains connected to the original materials.

Steedman states that ‘through the activities of thought and writing’ the historian ‘makes the stuff of the past (Everything) into a structure or event, a happening or a thing [which] never did happen in the way that it comes to be represented’ (2001, p.154). However, the event as such *did* happen. That ‘structure or event’ which the research brings forth already exists in the archive, albeit in a different form. Applied to this project, this reasoning would mean that the difference between women artists’ autobiographical texts and this research is, as Steedman puts it, in ‘the telling.’ The difference between these narratives is the form through which any project tells anew certain events, taking into account the researcher’s aims and beliefs – those she is aware of and those beyond her conscious knowledge. As a reader, the extent to which I am able to understand the different realities that women artists voice through their writing is bound by my own experience and reality, and by the context in which I receive the texts.

I suspect that, were Dorothea Tanning to have read my chapter on her memoir, she would have been highly displeased as she repeatedly denied that gender had any impact on her artistic identity during her life. She objected to being included in women artists’ anthologies and went as far as to publish a statement in the famous *Surrealism and Women* (1991) essay collection in which she distanced herself from the image of the woman artist. Reflecting an author’s intentions seems to me an impossible aim. But if in some way that had been my hope, I would have taken a more comprehensive approach to Tanning’s memoir. I would have had to, for instance, delve into the literature of Surrealism, map the historical moment when Tanning was first labelled a surrealist, and trace connections with the imagery of fellow surrealist artists. As I have framed the thesis, however, these areas of investigation are only tangentially relevant to the project – an argument which also applies to Carrington’s and Ringgold’s writings. In addition to the thesis’ overall focus on gender and artistic identity across time, this is also one of the reasons I dwell little on the artists’ historical milieu. As indebted as the texts might be to their context, I am not trying to place the content of their writings in conversation with their immediate environment, but rather with each other. I do provide a brief outline of each artist’s historical situation at the start of each chapter for the purposes of sketching the conditions in which the three texts emerge. However, my core interest is aligning these pieces of

writing in terms of what they convey about gender expectations and occupying space.

My interpretation of the materials, I am sure, does not always coincide with what the authors hoped to convey. However, as Jacqueline Rose argues, interpretation ‘cannot be arrested at the point it comes into conflict with how a writer sees their own depiction of others or of themselves. Once a piece of writing has been put into circulation, it ceases – except in the most material sense – to be the property of its author’ (2013, p.xiii). In other words, the writer gives up to interpretation what she chooses to share with her readers, for she cannot control the stories once they are out of her hands.

2.3.3 Hybrid Texts: challenging the boundaries of genre

What might seem most controversial among the decisions I took when interpreting my research materials is that I framed these three pieces of writing as autobiographical texts. This choice might be especially contentious in relation to Carrington’s short stories. Carrington’s surrealist tales have never been published under any category other than fiction. Nonetheless, her tales have been extensively studied by scholars as *romans à clef* – fictional accounts based on real life persons and events. Susan Suleiman (1993; 1999), Annette Levitt (1996, 1999), Whitney Chadwick (1998), Gloria Orenstein (1977) and Deborah Gaensbauer (1994) all have written about Carrington’s stories as *romans à clef* by tracing parallels between the artist’s life and the plots and characters in her narratives. Even Marina Warner, in the introduction to Carrington’s collected stories after several interviews with the artist, writes about the tales as *romans à clef*, particularly *Little Francis* (1989a, 1989b). There is a case to be made that to interpret literary fiction as autobiography impoverishes the reading. After all, literary fiction enables extraordinary flights of fancy, the existence of multiple meanings, and altogether great creativity. However, I want to make the opposite case based on the very same argument. I want to suggest that to interpret such imaginative texts as Carrington’s as autobiography, enhances the creative potential of autobiography. It widens what we might understand by autobiography. On this point, I seek to align myself with the argument that gender studies scholar

Mary Evans (2000) puts forward in her analysis of *The Bell Jar* (1963). Combining fiction and autobiography, Sylvia Plath's classic is an iconic example of genre blending. In her essay, Evans argues that hybrid texts – that is, writings that do not fit normative conventions of autobiography – such as Plath's novel, open up boundaries between genres in a productive way (2000, p.76). Evans argues that, as readers, we do not have the same expectations of hybrid texts as we do of texts which fit neatly into a specific genre. Consequently, she contends, using fiction enables authors to articulate ideas which would not be 'acceptable in [classic] autobiography' due to social taboos (p.76). Carrington's stories, I suggest, are hybrid texts. I find that Evans' arguments about Plath's novel are thus applicable to Carrington's case, especially because Evans is specifically referencing taboos on 'ambiguity and doubt around the issue of gender' (p.79), which is a core theme in Carrington's stories as well. Daughter figures in her surrealist tales are like the character of Esther in *The Bell Jar*, subject to strict gender expectations, but unable or unwilling to meet them. Just as *The Bell Jar* helps Evans expose how the autobiographical self is a product of multiple influences, combining fiction and personal experience, Carrington's stories help me show how young creative women like Carrington might have been affected by complex expectations and desires. Following Evans, I too aim to sustain that employing fiction in autobiography or writing fiction as autobiography exposes that all autobiography has indeed a fictional character or component. Thus, while Carrington's stories cannot be reduced to autobiography alone, they allow for rich autobiographical readings such as the one I have endeavoured to perform.

As readers, we can never know whether the stories we encounter are fictional, factually accurate, or a mix of both. Indeed, I would even suggest that that distinction is, to an extent, not significant. Only a genre's literary conventions lead us to misleadingly believe that we can know an author's *truth*. Because I am interested in how women artists create their textual persona, and not in any alleged truth, I find Carrington's imaginative stories, as much as Tanning's and Ringgold's memoirs, perfect to explore how women artists invent themselves through writing

Conclusion

In this chapter I have shown where this research is located by accounting for the decisions and rationale I followed while working through this project. In the first section, I outlined my motivations in structuring the literature review, highlighted how I framed my research materials as a form of ‘personal criticism’ and explained the differences between scholarship I draw on in Chapter One and that which I use to develop the case studies. In the second section, I delved into the subject of space. I showed how domestic space works as an organising thread through which I approach and present all the women artists’ autobiographical writings that I analyse in the thesis. Specifically, I outlined how I use space as a motif, tracking women artists’ textual selves as they move through their stories. Finally, I reflected on how I connected my research materials together through a process of narrativization. In the following chapters, I will pursue further the arguments I have laid out here, approaching Tanning’s, Carrington’s, and Ringgold’s writings as a form of criticism which carries potential for contributing to feminist politics and forming feminist connections.

Chapter Three: Dorothea Tanning's memoir: moving between artistic identity, creative partnership, and romanticised fantasies of heterosexual living

3 Introduction

A room is so much more than a room. Who is not familiar with Virginia Woolf's classic essay *A Room of One's Own*? I have always liked the way Woolf dismisses the question that she was originally meant to answer when she began to write this text. She refuses to assess the merits of women writers because 'gifts, whether of mind or character, cannot be weighted like sugar or butter' (2008, p.138). Woolf agrees that women's experiences influence their creative production. However, here she distances the process of writing from feminised activities through the metaphor of baking. No recipe will give you a good woman novelist because creativity is not quantifiable. For Woolf, creativity requires freedom. Indeed, much of her argument relies on the belief that if women pursue activities which have not been essentialised as feminine, they will get closer to that freedom. Hence, in her essay Woolf addresses the much more important question: what do women artists require to obtain creative freedom? Her answer is financial independence. Beyond anything else, a room is always a sign of financial independence. Woolf's point is that a woman who has resources, also has the space and the choice of how to dispose of her time and energy, which is absolutely crucial for any creative process. bell hooks writes on this subject:

Work for women artists is never just the moment we write, or do other art... In the fullest sense, it is also the time spent in contemplation and preparation... It is this stillness, this quietude, needed for the continued nurturance of any devotion to artistic practice – to one's work – that remains a space women (irrespective of race, class, nationality, etc.) struggle to find in our lives (1995, p.636).

hooks' words on art making evoke both the physical space and the time an artist needs to spend in that space to create. Creative freedom demands room to materialise and to grow. It might not seem that an artist is always in the process of producing something, but no art materialises out of nothing. Art emerges from thought and thought is time, which you can only take if you have the financial means to do so. Talking about how poets struggle to make ends meet, Adrienne Rich tells us that 'often [taking] such time feels like a luxury, guiltily seized when it can be had, fearfully taken because it does not seem like work' (1994, p.42). Rich stresses the guilt of taking time for contemplation because creative work, in particular that of women, most frequently goes unrewarded in our culture, economically and otherwise. We could interpret hooks' words in the same light. Women struggle to find the space for art making because generally women live, and have historically lived, under more precarious economic conditions than men, due to the roles they occupy given the gendered division of labour. Furthermore, hooks applies this argument to all women, irrespectively of other social positions they embody, because even when there are large economic and power differences among them, as artists, this structure places them all at a disadvantage against men. That is precisely why Woolf argues that financial means can give women the time and space they require to create.

Woolf's argument is surely optimistic in that it assumes that once women have financial independence, they will no longer feel bound to the feminised roles that keep them contained in the family. But as hooks details, writing over sixty years after *A Room of One's Own* was published: 'women continue to feel conflicted about the allocation of time, energy, engagement and passion' and 'worry about not giving enough of our care and personhood to loved ones' (1995, p.636). However, it is also true that without financial independence, the choice on how to allocate our time is not even there. We are stuck. To that extent, Woolf's argument was and remains brilliant. A woman with money can afford the *luxury* to lock herself away in a room to create. She might feel compelled, but she is not literally forced to undertake particular roles in the family or in society. Financial means give her the possibility to choose a different life, such as that of artist. And her room is a symbol for her independence and creative freedom, as well as the actual space where these unravel.

According to her memoir, Dorothea Tanning's childhood in the American Midwest was uneventful – nothing initially seems to indicate she would later choose a creative life. The artist describes Galesburg, Illinois, as a dull place where 'you sat on the davenport waiting to grow up' (2001, p.16). In her family's monotonous semi-rural life, her mother seems to have been the paragon of domesticity, a woman 'whose most distinguishing trait was her motherness,' as she fluttered about her three daughters, providing comfort to all (p.17). Among this pervasive feminine presence, her father, a self-exiled, sports obsessed, and passionately American Swedish immigrant, was on the other side of the gender divide, 'conveniently distanced from domestic details' (p.18). But despite his absence from the family's everyday realities, Andreas Thaning, highly admiring of his daughter's artistic talents, provided the young Dorothea with the support that her mother's lack of conviction failed to deliver. It was him who Tanning would appeal to for financial help in her first years of study. However, while obliging to her requests, both father and mother conveyed their disappointment as she went through college without settling on a *suitable* husband. In this discouraging but not punishing environment, Tanning did not need to rebel against uncompromising parental desires. Yet, like in adulthood later, she had to persevere, pushing back against the little details that threatened to wear down her motivation to create. From the beginning, gender was for Tanning a hindrance, as she 'was hung about with intricate hips and shoulders... as diffidently worn as the ones in museum pictures' (2001, p.17). The signs of womanhood encumbered her, as they made her resemble *the model* more than the artist.

I have chosen to begin this chapter in the woman artist's room, Tanning's room, her studio, because I want to underscore the significance of that space for her artistic identity. Without a room and all that it signifies – freedom of thought, time and independence – it becomes so much more difficult for a woman to be an artist. So, I would like to take you to Dorothea Tanning's studio in 1942 as it is described in her memoir *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001). In 1942 Tanning was working as an advertising illustrator for Macy's in New York. Her work enabled her to support herself as an artist and rent a spacious apartment in which she had a studio (2001, p.69). This studio was crucial to her artistic career. However, drawing on her memoir,

I will also argue that Tanning marks this space as a catalyst for the partial loss of her artistic self when she invites Max Ernst, who was to become her lifelong partner, inside. Divided in three sections, the first part of this chapter considers how Ernst's arrival changed the meaning of Tanning's workspace and the way she portrays herself in the text. I highlight how her studio is unanticipatedly transformed into the domain of the wife and housewife. The second part reflects on how Tanning depicts her relationship to the heterosexual household with the arrival of these figures in her story. Finally, the last section considers how she articulates ambivalence towards her role as an artist through her textual investment into feminised behaviours.

In this first case study chapter, I employ a selection of quotes from Tanning's writing to explore how she comes to terms with the constraints that materialise around her as she is increasingly identified with a wife and housewife. In particular, I dwell on passages which speak about space and the allocation of personal time to examine how the demands of everyday life interfere with the reflexive process Woolf, hooks, Rich, and others mark as necessary for artistic practice. I comb through her words for moments of resonance that echo difficulties I have seen, read, or heard elsewhere, in order to understand how she inhabits the home and seemingly irreconcilable roles through her textual self.

My main source of analysis is Tanning's memoir *Between Lives*. This text is an expanded and slightly edited version of her earlier memoir, *Birthday* (1987). I rely more heavily on *Between Lives* because it offers a more layered image of Tanning than *Birthday*¹⁵, which focuses on Ernst to a greater extent. Nonetheless, it must be said that in both texts, Tanning extensively draws on her relationship with Ernst to shape her textual self. Although this is reflected in this chapter, I also feel the responsibility to point out that Tanning's artistic work has enduringly portrayed strong and independent female characters, whilst also challenging women's roles in

¹⁵ Tanning named her first memoir *Birthday*, but prior to that, *Birthday* was the title of the famous self-portrait she painted in 1942. As I will discuss, *Birthday* reappears in her second memoir as a painting and as a symbol to mark a key moment in Tanning's life story. Therefore, when talking about *Birthday* in this chapter, I will be specifically focusing on that moment, as it appears in the text of *Between Lives*.

patriarchal traditions. Thus, I am in no way arguing that Tanning's artistic identity was dependent on Ernst. Rather, as I will show, I suggest that she shaped her textual self in a dialogue with him, because he was a significant presence in her everyday existence. Those who have written about Tanning's artistic production, for example Victoria Carruthers, have stressed how Tanning used her work to contest the fabric of everyday life and explore what happens to women underneath what we can see (2011, p.135). In particular, Carruthers details how Tanning employs the tropes of Gothic literature to portray the domestic space as alienating. Similarly, French literature professor Katharine Conley argues that Tanning defies the association of the house as a safe space for women, by representing it as 'claustrophobic, [and] haunted by malevolent spirits' (2009, p.50). Others, such as Soo Y. Kang, explore Tanning's female take on the figure of the *femme-enfant* who, in the artist's imagery, defies patriarchal authority by refusing men's sexualised gaze (2002, p.94). Tanning's autobiographical writing is not devoid of strong female figures either. Her own teenage self, as she describes it, is strong-minded. However, as I will attempt to show, her writing, like the title of the memoir announces, dwells more on spaces *between lives*, the artist's and the woman's¹⁶.

¹⁶ Tate Modern has scheduled a retrospective of Dorothea Tanning for 2019 which will, for the first time in the UK, include works from the artist's entire career.

3.1 The loss of her creative space



Figure 1: *Birthday*, by Dorothea Tanning, Oil on canvas, 40 1/4 x 25 1/2 in, 1942.

I had been struck, one day, by a fascinating array of doors –hall, kitchen, bathroom, studio– crowded together, soliciting my attention with their antic planes, light, shadows, imminent openings and shuttings. From there it was an easy leap to a dream of countless doors. Oh, there was perspective, trapped in my own room! Perhaps in a way it was a talisman for the things that were happening, an iteration of quiet event, line densities wrought in a crystal paperweight of time where nothing was expected to appear except the finished canvas and, later, a few snowflakes, for the season was Christmas 1942, and Max was my Christmas present (Tanning, 2001, p.63).

A self-portrait and more, *Birthday*¹⁷ depicts Tanning standing next to a strange winged creature in the middle of a room, her studio¹⁸. Her sight is lost in an apparent expression of melancholia and her body tilted towards the door on her left, with her hand resting on the handle, seems as if about to turn and walk through it or invite us in. Behind the first door, a range of similar doors extends into seeming infinity, hinting at a strikingly empty set of rooms. The image transmits eroticism but also a subtle vulnerability. Her right hand clasps a heavy cloth wrapped around her waist, and on her shoulders, an elaborate silk coat finished with tree roots at the lower end, is open down the middle, leaving her chest exposed. I find this painting oddly moving. It is sober and enigmatic, and I feel compelled to describe it because it stands as a representation of Tanning at a juncture in which artistic opportunities were opening up to her¹⁹. The Julien Levy Gallery, who was at the forefront of promoting Surrealism in New York, had recently offered to represent her. Her art was beginning to gain some recognition and her dreams of travelling to Paris, to make it as an artist in Europe, seemed all the more real. Young and talented, unencumbered by a family or material belongings, as she stands in this picture, *Birthday* conveys that Tanning's future was full of possibility. Describing the events that inspired *Birthday* in her memoir, Tanning tells us how she was 'struck... by a dream of countless doors' (2001,

¹⁷ In 1943 a reproduction of *Birthday* was published in VVV magazine together with a short story written by Tanning: *Blind Date*. Catriona McAra has argued that the publication of Tanning's work in the periodical announced her 'official' entry into the surrealist scene of New York (2011, p.100). In *Blind Date*, the protagonist sets out to find her 'lost sewing machine.' The sewing machine seems to be a metaphor for the protagonist's ability to thread disconnected parts of her life together in a world that has been shattered by the war.

¹⁸ Pictorial readings of *Birthday*, such as those in Soo Y. Kang (2002) or Sarah Wilson (1989), have interpreted the presence of this animal as a symbol of the supernatural world of dreams. As such, in their readings, the woman in the image represents a transitional state between conscious and unconscious worlds, the outside reality and the 'wild' inner space of woman.

¹⁹ In an interview with Alain Jouffroy, Tanning dismissed literal autobiographical readings of her artwork saying: '[T]here is nothing in my paintings that corresponds to my physical life. There is a history of my dreams. In all cases the biography for me, if not a flagrant lie, is at best a deformed mirror' (cited in Lumbard, 1981, p.50). This is an interesting claim given that Tanning directly connects *Birthday*, the painting, with the events of her life in her memoir. I am tempted to read Tanning's statement as a case for the blurring of reality and fiction in autobiographical writing and art.

p.63)²⁰. In her literary imaginary, these doors come to signify perspective. She stands in the middle of the studio, which is both her domestic space and her workspace, and from that position, she has perspective on her future. Her 'own room,' where up until that point she was 'trapped' because she was not expecting anything other but to go on painting, to finish her 'canvas,' suddenly opens up to a range of doors, behind which there are spaces to be discovered. The doors, ajar, suggest something is to be found behind them, in those rooms, something which is yet unknown. However, if these doors contain possibility, nothing is yet determined. To find out what is there, she will first need to go through them.

3.1.1 *Birthday as a turning point*

The metaphor of door as threshold is significant in Tanning's memoir because her interactions in domestic – interior – spaces determine much of how she crafts her textual self. In that sense, in this chapter I interpret the space within the boundaries of the domestic as the figurative and material site Tanning employs to present herself. Through the story's spatial details, I emphasise what matters to her as a narrator and how she articulates the rationale that justifies her compromising her creative life, despite her misgivings. Looking at the meaning of space in theatrical representation, Hanna Scolnicov reflects on the traditional association of indoor spaces as feminine and outdoor spaces as masculine. She argues that this distinction makes representations of the home 'a gender-charged environment, naturally fitted for acting out the drama of man and woman' (1994, p.7). In Scolnicov's view, the spaces in which woman is represented reflect her condition in society, where occupying indoor spaces can mark the home as the site of woman's containment, while stepping outdoors functions as a sign of her autonomy. Furthermore, Scolnicov adds that the house 'can also be seen to stand for her body and sexuality,' which eroticises interior spaces and the act of entering the house (p.7). Doors mark the

²⁰ It is relevant to mention that Tanning repeatedly and directly addresses her reader as 'reader' in the narrative (see for example pp.145, 147, 168). This form of address even more than in other autobiographical texts, stresses the relationship that exists between author and audiences. Thus, when using the phrase 'Tanning tells us' in this chapter, my intention is to bring forward the connection on which the existence of the author's textual self ultimately depends.

boundary where male and female confront each other, and so, depending on where the characters are positioned, a closed or an open door can stand as a symbol of exchange, connection, repression, and more (1994, pp.7-8). Scolnicov's thoughts on space and representation are highly relevant in this first section because, although the scene of *Birthday* evokes 'countless' possibilities and 'perspective,' it also marks the encounter of Dorothea Tanning and Max Ernst. When narrating the events that inspired *Birthday*, Tanning textually stages her encounter with Ernst at the threshold of her apartment. In doing so, she exploits the 'charged' gendered tropes attached to interior space, endowing the meeting with particular romantic significance that reverberates throughout the memoir. It matters very little that Tanning has indeed met Ernst before at one of Julien Levy's cocktail parties (2001, p. 57). As if the previous meeting had never occurred, I propose that *Between Lives* defines this second encounter as a turning point in Tanning's life, closely connecting the changes to come with the meaning she attributes to space in that instant. Tanning's narrative loads and genders the exchange that happens between her and Ernst in terms of their positions *vis-à-vis* the home. *Birthday* announces that her home – her studio – is about to become something else, and as the space changes, so will her role within it.

The scene of *Birthday* relates how, appearing in her life at the same exact moment that her artistic career was taking off, Ernst crucially shaped the direction of Tanning's future. Max Ernst was a charismatic and charming figure, arguably the most representative artist of the surrealist movement and nineteen years her senior. Describing him as a 'splendid and mysterious human being' (p. 271), *Between Lives* tells us how, for Tanning, Ernst embodied artistic success and romantic possibility. While the promise of success and that of romance have crucially different paths, Tanning's memoir portrays her textual self as deeply invested in both. *Birthday* conveys a moment of change through which Tanning relates how her existence shifts from *life as an artist* to *life as an artist and as a woman*, or more specifically *life as a wife*. In the narrative this change occurs in connection to the space Tanning occupies, her apartment, which acquires a different meaning when Ernst arrives.

In the text, Tanning, the narrator, leads us through her meeting with Ernst step by step. Opening with a '[p]lease come in,' Tanning invites him to enter her apartment

(2001, p.63). It is a space of work. Functional, it has no rugs and hardly any furniture. Coming on behalf of a gallery, Ernst's arrival is meant to be a work meeting. He is there to see her artwork²¹. Taking him to the studio, the only piece of furniture Tanning highlights in the text is 'an easel.' She is a painter, so what else would she need but an easel? Her studio is the space where she works, spends long hours concentrating, creating and expressing herself. However, the tone of the encounter swiftly changes when Tanning's narrative strategically stresses the presence of an unfinished portrait on the easel. It is *Birthday*. Through *Birthday*, Tanning's memoir marks a particular moment in space and time as central to the narrative. *Birthday* describes Tanning's 'own room' in the 'Christmas of 1942.' And that moment becomes meaningful because she attributes her future 'happiness' to this encounter. She tells us that *Birthday* is a 'talismán,' a 'crystal paperweight' that magnetises all the professional and romantic possibilities that were opening up to her. In the first instance, it is the artist Dorothea Tanning and the painting which bring Ernst to her doorstep. However, when Tanning states '[t]hat we were both painters did not strike me at the time as anything other as the *happiest of coincidences* [emphasis added]' (p.64), she conveys that it is not the artist for whom Ernst stays. This statement sounds naïve, though the rest of the memoir is much less so. Yet, what this sentence brings out is that the encounter shifts from a work meeting to a romantic one. Ernst does not choose a painting and leave, as he was meant to do. He stays. They play chess. He comes back to play day after day. One week later, he is moving into her apartment and into her life.

I would argue that Tanning's remark, when she says that *Birthday* is 'unfinished' on the easel, is decisive in this scene. This sentence and the events that follow when Ernst moves in confer him a special role, as if his presence brought the final touch to *Birthday*, which is after all a self-portrait. Implying that Ernst's arrival completes *Birthday* by giving full meaning to that moment in time, Tanning's narrative romantically invests him with the power to define, or at least partially define, her

²¹ As it is highlighted in Conley (2009), Ernst was selecting pictures for an exhibition due to take place at the 'gallery of his then wife Peggy Guggenheim,' whom he had married earlier that year (p.50). Tanning seems to deliberately omit this information in her memoir, so as to reinforce the narrative of romance she is creating.

identity. His presence completes her portrait because it channels her life in one direction. This change, where ‘countless’ possibilities – symbolised by the metaphor of ‘countless doors’ – are suddenly narrowed to a single outcome, happens in relation to space. It is not that Ernst actively wants to make her into something else. It is that his arrival changes the meaning of the space she occupies. As it is no longer the artist’s studio because it is becoming the heterosexual couple’s home, her role in relation to that space shifts to the figure of wife, and later, as I will try to show, to that of housewife. Only a couple of pages from her description of *Birthday*, Tanning narrates in an uncertain tone how the transformation of her personal space thus transforms her:

It took only a few hours for him to move in. There was no discussion. It was as if he had found a house. Yes, I think I was his house. He lived in me, he decorated me, he watched over me. From one hour to the next my plain echoing floor-through was packed like a series of boxes so that our voice, when all the moving and hefting was done, stayed close to us as indeed they had wanted to from the beginning. I watched, in an agreeable state of mild vertigo. It was above all so natural and right, I thought; the long wait on the station platform was rewarded by the arrival of the train, as one knew it would be, sooner or later. In no time at all, the last picture found a place by the door and the last mask was hung over my desk (2001, pp.64-65).

I find this passage highly disturbing. Tanning’s words articulate the violence that Ernst’s irruption into her personal space entails. In the clearest manner, she describes how he ‘found’ and took her house, including her in the arrangement with ‘no discussion’ involved. Feeding into gendered tropes of female passivity, she paints the picture of a woman who after waiting on the ‘station platform’ is finally ‘rewarded’ by the arrival of her loved one. This image seems to reduce her previous existence to a state of incompleteness, where her actual life as a woman only starts once Ernst arrives. Trading independence for partnership, the narrator casts her textual self in the role of a young helpless girl: Ernst now ‘watches over her.’ The fantasy of love rationalises her passivity; the protagonist’s seeming lack of involvement in the decision of living together. But even more troubling is the way that her narrative slides from romance

to self-objectification. Tanning tells us how she becomes Ernst's house. The words 'he lived in me, he decorated me' literally suggest she now exists as a part of his house. She is like furniture, like an interior space that Ernst can ornament and use for his comfort. While she is effectively inside the house with him, this paragraph indicates that her status in the house is not equal to his. Instead, she has become what makes the house *a home*. Turning Tanning's apartment into the couple's house Ernst and Tanning are no longer simply two artists. Reflecting the differential role that women and men play in patriarchal culture's fantasy of heterosexual romance, Tanning comes to occupy the part of wife. I would argue that she symbolically becomes Ernst's home because, from that point on, *Between Lives* shows that she will provide him with emotional and material support. She will invest herself in home building and take care of domestic tasks. Tanning's recollections in her memoir suggest that Ernst supported her individual growth and admired her artistic talent. However, in a practical sense, the text underlines how his presence in Tanning's life imposed on her a series of affective demands which compelled her to fulfil a domestic role.

3.1.2 A shift in space is a shift in roles: from artist to housewife

To some extent when Tanning declares feeling a 'mild vertigo' when Ernst appears, the text betrays a sense of apprehension at the way her life, the artist's life, is about to change. Yet, she immediately provides a counterpoint to this statement when she claims that it feels 'natural and right.' The confidence of her tone in asserting this, illustrates the privileged status that normative structures of heterosexual partnership bear in our culture. Whatever Tanning might have felt, as a narrator she can express with aplomb that her new living arrangement feels 'right' because the statement emerges in a cultural context where the heterosexual couple is naturalised. Under the roof of the heterosexual couple, Tanning textually positions herself on the site where femininity becomes loaded with the demands of domesticity. Her immediate readiness to fulfil the tasks this position imposes on her, without reflection on the costs it may carry for her career as an artist, make it relevant to discuss the relationship between heterosexuality and division of labour.

In an articulate critique of domesticity and housework, the Wages for Housework campaign in the 1970s addressed the problematic way in which the figure of housewife has been naturalised as intrinsic to womanhood in our society. The most fundamental and contentious argument that the founders of the Wages for Housework campaign, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, introduced in their work was that 'all women are housewives' (1972, p.2). This statement ought not to be taken literally. Wages for Housework acknowledged that not all women were living their life as housewives insofar as they were not actually performing domestic chores. By the 1970s numerous women had integrated the labour market in the public sphere and were not living in a couple or nuclear family. What the statement means is that under capitalist conditions of production all women are housewives because all women are *expected* to provide free care for the family. And this expectation is based on the naturalisation of domestic labour as feminine. Silvia Federici takes issue with those women who refuse the premise that all 'women are housewives' when she claims: 'This fraud that goes under the name of love and marriage affects all of us, even if we are not married, because *once housework was totally naturalised and sexualised*, once it became a feminine attribute, all of us as females are characterised by it' (1975, p.4). Not only does this statement highlight that domestic labour essentialises all women, it suggests that romantic partnership and domestic femininity are complicit in maintaining this gendered division of labour. From that perspective, I propose that the change in Tanning's living arrangement makes her not only Ernst wife, but also a housewife – a role she embodies because her positions in relation to the domestic setting and division of labour impose particular *expectations* on her.

At this point in the memoir, these *expectations* on Tanning's time and energy materialise through the presence of Ernst's objects around her. His belongings, antique 'masks,' 'paintings,' clutter the protagonist's apartment, challenging her artistic workspace. Tanning narrates how her studio, fully 'packed,' disappears behind the 'boxes.' Hence, these objects effectively limit her textual self by pulling her into a domestic role through their presence on the page. Overall, the objects begin to establish the image of a shared home. Individually, they get in Tanning's way, changing her space and changing her narrative as she moves about them, as she

looks at them, as she feels them. More importantly, they anchor her to the space by pre-empting her freedom of movement. In a practical sense, objects limit movement by retaining us close to home, demanding to be used, and asking not to be left behind when we go. However, I would contend that the tone of romance and happiness that engulfs this passage masks the invasive – vertigo inducing – character of Ernst’s arrival. She portrays this moment as feeling ‘rewarded,’ and ‘wanting,’ and being in an ‘agreeable state.’ Hence, although Tanning’s written self dizzily vacillates against such a sudden change, her words also indicate that she desires Ernst’s presence and the promise of heterosexual domesticity and happiness he carries.

In the second chapter of *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) Sara Ahmed traces the genealogy of the ‘happy housewife’ figure through Western philosophy. Earlier in the text, Ahmed had discussed the ways through which the family is connected with happiness as a fantasy of good life. She details how the cultural assumption that a person gets closer to happiness by adopting her family’s desire as her own regulates desire (2010, p.45). To meet the family’s desires means to serve and make the family happy, in particular for a woman. Drawing on Rousseau’s *Émile* she explains further that a deviation from the role of housewife symbolically compromises the whole family’s ability to be happy (p.55). I believe it is worth reflecting on what constitutes a deviation from the role of housewife? As Ahmed shows, the prohibition for women to deviate from the role of housewife is ultimately a prohibition to digress from gender roles through which a woman keeps her husband content. A woman’s objective ought to be to keep her husband happy, so as to keep the family together (p.55). She works to make him happy because she is attached to the family as an ideal form of living through which she can participate in that happiness. Making him happy will bring her closer to happiness because the family is a way of life privileged above others. Hence, the labour that she performs as a housewife is the cost of her sharing his privilege. I see this form of privilege as that which Tanning’s memoir sustains as she describes Ernst’s arrival in such positive terms, and later in the text, endeavours to keep him content. She implicitly embraces the role of ‘happy housewife’ by representing the fantasy of romance, which sets up the *ideal* material conditions to create the heterosexual couple’s home.

I have argued in this section that Tanning articulates her shift from artist to wife, and housewife, through the changes in her living conditions. However, such a change is only possible in the first place because the narrative suggests she is attached to heterosexual partnership. It is this attachment which leads her to invite Ernst into her story, into her personal space – a space which then becomes the heterosexual couple’s home, and so makes her narrative self, if not only, *then also*, a wife and a housewife. At the beginning of the section I mentioned how in Tanning’s memoir, the painting *Birthday* symbolises a moment of potential. However, I want to argue that Ernst stepping into Tanning’s life suddenly contains this potential because, as a key character, he concentrates in his persona her artistic and romantic desires. When Tanning says that Ernst is her ‘Christmas present,’ the terms highlight her investment into an ideal of creative and intimate partnership. Although we find moments of great ambivalence further in the memoir, at that particular point in the text, the encounter sustains a fantasy connecting happiness and heterosexual romance. Hence, Tanning’s encounter with Ernst at the threshold of her apartment, at the threshold of *Birthday* is an organising *chapter* in Tanning’s written life. The encounter initiates the gender drama Scolnicov refers to, a drama of woman and man, a drama of roles and expectations. Cast in symbolic and literal proximity to the domestic space and all the roles woman personify in these spaces, it is a drama where Tanning will later be torn between artistic and ‘wifely’ demands – these are the terms she uses (2001, p.280).

Tanning tells us that when she met Ernst he immediately moved into her space, taking possession of it as his own – from then on, his home. From the perspective I have adopted here, this passage of the memoir symbolises that by closing the doors behind him, Ernst locked Tanning into that domestic space, where she became his wife. His appearance in the text, I argued, closes down other potential narrative threads. Furthermore, taking the house as a metaphor of woman’s body, Ernst’s entering Tanning’s space is also sexualised. I would add that moving in with her, becoming her lover, and figuratively closing the doors, his character asserted a heterosexual claim over her that symbolically enclosed her into *proper* femininity. As Scolnicov describes, historically, ‘[t]he virtue of chastity [that sustains the heterosexual ideal] was assured by the woman being closed off, immured in her

house, while the open door and mouth were taken to signify sexual incontinence' (1994, p.7). Tanning goes from being enclosed in the home to being enclosed in a feminised role. She becomes enclosed in a different story, a romantic story which limits where she can go. In that context, Ernst symbolically becomes a gatekeeper, Tanning's only point of access to both artistic success and the heterosexual fantasy of romantic partnership. And so, this is a story about doors, a story about the doors we choose to go through and what we find behind them. It is also a story about doors that close around us, and the spaces in which we find ourselves stuck when they do. It is ultimately a story about those who can, and do, open and close those doors for us, a story about their privilege and ours.

3.2 A woman artist in the heterosexual couple's home

In 1942, when Dorothea Tanning met Max Ernst, she was thirty-two years old. They would spend their life together until the death of Ernst in 1976. Tanning lived for thirty-six more years, giving herself completely to her artistic career. She produced vast quantities of work including, in addition to her paintings: sculpture, two published poetry books, *A Table of Content* (2004) and *Coming to That* (2011), and the novel *Chasm: A Weekend* (2004)²². Although Tanning never stopped making art, during the time she lived with Ernst, she also spent a substantial amount of her everyday life dedicated to home building²³. Tanning and Ernst travelled and relocated multiple times, first from New York to Sedona, and later to Paris, Huismes and Seillans. *Between Lives* relates how, in each of these places, Tanning applied herself to create and recreate an idealised domestic environment, or as she puts it: a 'haven' of happiness (2001, p.267). However, while Tanning is inclined to describe domestic life

²² McAra points out in her essay '“Blind Date”: Tanning's Surrealist Anti-Tale,' that Tanning wrote a first version of *Chasm* in the middle of the 1940s, when living in Arizona (2011, p.104). The text had been previously published as *Abyss* in 1949, and then again in 1977, each time changed and expanded. Tanning's constant revisiting and editing of her memoirs and stories highlights how she understood both autobiographical and fiction writing as a constantly developing creative process.

²³ By *home building* I am referring to the literal construction of the house but also to all the emotionally charged activities through which we might turn a dwelling space into a home.

in romantic terms, I want to highlight how a feeling of ambivalence permeates the text, indicating that something else might be going on. Furthermore, Tanning's studio was always also her home. As such, the narrator conveys how, the fact that her space as an artist overlapped with the space of domestic labour made her experience of this space layered and complex. In this section I show how Tanning was both an artist and a woman in ways that may have sometimes competed with each other. Specifically, I will discuss the ways in which she recounts her experience and roles in the heterosexual couple's house. I am interested in exploring how she puts forward a particular image of herself drawing even further on idealised images of heterosexual partnership, but also how these images sometimes falter.

3.2.1 Scripts on how to be a good wife and housewife

Between Lives is full of houses, but perhaps the most important is the one Tanning refers to as 'the House,' the last place where she lived together with Ernst. 'On leave from her canvas,' Tanning literally designed, supervised and brought this house to completion (2001, p.259). It was an extraordinary investment of time, energy and passion:

Day after day sees me wave, call the dog, and climb the hill. If it is my house it has to be watched, like a nest of hatchlings, that no ill can come. A rectangular nest of stone sits upon my chest at night, its builder words securely mortared into my sleep. To this day, if I must describe the *portée d'un poutre*, there is only my precious Harrap's (French-English) to help me say 'beam span'; the *doloire* that sounds so sad was only a shovel that chopped away at sand and *mortier de chaux* (lime mortar). *Limousinage* (stone masonry), *bétonnage* (concrete masonry), yes, and braces, lintels. Shall I always remember their hinges, their mortises, along with the smiles as I brought from my basket the bottle of wine, *le coup de rouge*? Sometimes Max waves from his window, down below.

Up there I am joshing, discussing the work, using those words that I shall never in all my life use again. Knowledgeable perhaps. Freakish,

unwomanly, I feel rather than see the house rise, feeding on me (Tanning, 2001, pp.262-263).

In her memoir, Dorothea Tanning discusses how despite having a reputation for being sexist, the surrealist men held great respect for marriage and fidelity, 'endowing the simple ancient concepts with a kind of luminosity' (2001, p.78). *Between Lives* is immersed in this bright halo of romance. Tanning's quote here shows that she took her roles as wife and housewife extremely seriously. Her words indicate a deep feeling of responsibility, but also the tediousness that day to day demands imposed on her. Stressing the conditional status of her current situation, 'if it is my house,' it 'has to be watched,' Tanning's words suggests that she has no choice but to take care of the house. It is worth asking, why does Tanning seem to feel such a strong sense of obligation? As I develop through the following pages, I argue that she does because, when she employs the possessive pronoun 'my' next to 'house,' she relinquishes her ability to define herself in other terms. By using this pronoun Tanning appears to allow the space – the heterosexual couple's home – to define her as a wife and as a housewife. It is her house, and so in that house, she is not simply an artist or a woman, she is the *woman of the house*. The metaphorical language she employs feeds into this cultural trope, strengthening the nurturing and caring traits of this position. The housewife might or might not be a mother, but her house is her 'nest'; the demands of her house are like 'hatchlings' waiting to be fed, fulfilled and protected. Even when there is no apparent impending threat, Tanning ought to preserve her house from any 'ill' by responding to the *expectations* that this role carries, because she has positioned herself in that space.

However, what is perhaps most interesting about this passage is its prescriptive character, which dictates how do these expectations need to be fulfilled. Describing her movements throughout the day, Tanning details the specific, yet tacit rules, through which she must answer these demands. She relates how 'day after day' she needs to 'climb the hill' – symbolically and literally already an effort – and once she gets to the construction site of the house, she needs to smile, josh, talk, share a glass of wine with the contractor, the carpenter, the electrician, and more. She needs to engage in this physical and emotional labour routinely to ensure that no 'ill' comes to

the house. Her role as a housewife prescribes that she has to be a good hostess, friendly, almost flirty, which leads her to inscribe herself into codified feminine behaviours.

Tanning's writing shows an understanding that these behaviours are crucial to inform those around her of her position. They serve to reinforce the myth of the 'happy housewife.' In fact, taken literally, Tanning's actions in her story follow the pattern of the happy housewife's life. Drawing on the work of Ahmed earlier, I discussed how the happy housewife's main role was to keep her husband content. Nonetheless, what is even more compelling in Ahmed's argument, is that it underlines how the philosophical tradition which positions women as housewives, simultaneously institutes social relations by 'creating "scripts" for how to live well' which shape everyday life (2010, p.59). Hence, for example, undertaking housework becomes a requirement to achieve a good life because it makes the family happy: a good house is a clean house; a good house is a house maintained by a dutiful woman; a good house is a house where that duty is performed out of love for one's family.

Maintaining a house becomes part of the everyday life script the housewife has to follow for the family's sake. Therefore, if failing to perform the tasks that fulfil the family's desires distances a woman from the role of housewife, then something as simple as failing to feel happy while doing housework could make a woman deviate from this role. Following the script does not require only performing the duties. Following the script requires experiencing the role as oneself. It demands feeling. Hence, if feeling is meant to keep a woman connected with the scripts she has to follow, in Dorothea Tanning's case I find it relevant to ask, what happens when feeling is absent or is not the *right* kind of feeling? Materially, Tanning's narrative shows how she follows her housewife's script, executing all the tasks required from her. However, does Tanning fail to embody the role of 'happy housewife' because she performs it *without feeling*? As I have started to indicate, I want to suggest that her written self seems to sometimes lack the kind of feeling *appropriate* to the situation.

Despite Tanning's insistence that it is her responsibility to care for her house, she portrays how she is ill at ease with the task. Perhaps it is precisely because she frames her role in 'watching the house' as a responsibility that it appears as a burden. If she

had successfully embraced the role of housewife, it may have been more likely she would describe her prescribed activities as *natural*, perhaps even pleasurable. However, Tanning's narrative emphasises that this labour puts a strain on her. The house, she says, literally 'rises' by 'feeding on her.' Through her words, I feel this house as a burden, as if heavy 'concrete' walls, 'beams' and 'lime mortar' were closing the space around her and suffocating her. The house seems almost ravenous, eating up her strength, her energy and her time. Because her constant presence is required, there is nothing else left of her at this moment. She has no other self. Forget the artist. The artist is, she has told us herself: 'On leave.' Always 'watching' and always 'smiling,' Tanning's self has been absorbed by her role, her wifely character, which enables the construction to go ahead. Hence, the labour Tanning describes makes possible for the heterosexual couple's home to emerge from the ground at great personal cost. The idealised heterosexual couple's home materialises as *her* story.

In the previous passage I analysed, I argued that Tanning's words objectified her as if she was an element of the house when Ernst moves in with her. Here, I can almost see her lying down, eyes closed, immured in the foundations of the house. In this passage, Tanning conveys that her existence is integral to the house in a way that blurs the boundaries between her and the space. Her highly graphic description places her body at the centre of the construction site. Her responsibility as a housewife is so hefty that her ideal 'nest' turns to 'stone,' pressing on 'her chest at night,' and impeding her to breath. The narrative assimilates construction vocabulary with a core building material: mortar; and so, the words themselves become the mortar that slowly trap her into the build²⁴. Tanning description of her life in this passage reads to me like a form of slow death. Ironically, although her assumed role as a housewife is what compels her to take charge of these activities, Tanning indicates that these activities make her feel 'freakish' and 'unwomanly.' She strongly stresses her negative feelings. Indeed, insofar as her role is concerned, these feelings

²⁴ It is worth mentioning that in the essay 'Some Parallels in Words and Pictures,' Tanning explains how she associated French language with her experience of living with Ernst (1989, p.172). Hence, intrinsically related, her efforts to learn the language merge with her efforts to make a house. Both of them are part of the sacrifice she makes for her husband.

are the opposite of what she is meant to experience in that situation. I am tempted to suggest that the disparity between her seemingly 'joshing and smiley' attitude, and the profound anxiety and discomfort she describes, reflects the gap that potentially exists between fantasy and reality.

Through a close reading of Tanning's quote, above, I try to show how the passage expresses ambivalence towards her role as a housewife. Nonetheless, the quote also seems to demonstrate that Tanning's textual self is invested in the fantasy of heterosexuality and domesticity because she repeatedly engages in the activities that sustain it – the phrase the house is *my* 'nest' echoes into my ears. It seems to me that a fantasy which regularly fails to deliver the promises of happiness it carries, would fade, but Tanning's case proves to be more complex. *Between Lives* shows that something else appears to motivate her to remain in this situation in spite of her literal displeasure. I interpret that intangible something as her own *expectations*. In the narrative, Tanning begins this passage asserting in emotionally charged terms that it is her duty to 'watch the house.' Calling forth her own responsibility as duty, she evokes a range of implicit expectations, which are attached to the role she has assumed. This role prompts her to align her actions in the story with her position whilst also providing her with an affective rationale: 'it is *my house*,' I care for it, and therefore I have to protect it. Arlie Hochschild argues that culture regulates actions through institutionalised feeling rules underpinned by a moral stance: 'A social role [in that context] – such as that of bride, wife or mother – is partly a way of describing what people think are owed and owing. A role establishes a baseline for what feelings seem appropriate to a certain series of events' (2012, p.74). Hence, adopting the role of housewife, a woman assumes a series of emotional responsibilities, which are mirrored by its corresponding emotional expectations. Roles and figures that govern relationships of mutual dependence between family members, such as the housewife role I am exploring through Tanning's memoir, institute particularly powerful feeling rules because as Hochschild explains, family relationships are naturalised as a product of love (p.69). In that sense, deviating from a family role can bring on a particularly punitive moral judgement because it becomes an equivalent to deviating *from nature*. If Tanning's textual self stopped investing her energy into making a home and returned to her easel and her paintings, would her failure to

perform her happy housewife's task question the narrator's attachment to this role? Would it question the depth of her attachment to the heterosexual couple? Following Hochschild arguments, it potentially could. And if her attachment to the role she is positioned in weakens, what does that make her? Tanning's narrative does not answer this question because, happy or unhappy, the story relates how she fulfils her responsibilities, thus taking up the figure of housewife, but doubt lurks in the background.

3.2.2 Developing the *right* kind of feelings

Arlie Hochschild also argues that framing family feeling as natural masks the work that goes into developing and sustaining these feelings (2012, p.69). The moral imperative to care for one's family is key in this passage. The imperative dictates, for example, the way a housewife ought to undertake labour involved into supporting her husband and her family: she needs to do it because love makes her care for their wellbeing above her own. There is a sacrificial element involved into this definition. To the extent that making her family happy is naturalised as an emotional duty for her, she ought to undertake this duty willingly and happily, as if it satisfied her own happiness, whether it does or not. In his short essay *The Family Spirit* (1998), Pierre Bourdieu highlights all the practical and symbolic work that goes into the making of 'family feeling.' Drawing on his famous notion of *habitus*, by which a 'common principle of vision' is inculcated through socialisation, Bourdieu argues that the family is institutionalised as a symbolic ideal through ritualised exchanges which create an affective bond between family members (pp.66-68). These exchanges turn the 'obligation to love [attached to family roles – including that of wife] into a loving disposition... that generates devotion, generosity and solidarity' (Bourdieu, 1998, p.68). Furthermore, Bourdieu emphasises the gendered character of these rituals when he specifies how the 'exchange of gifts, service, assistance, visits, attention, kindnesses... falls more particularly to the women, who are responsible for maintaining relationships (not only with their own family but very often also with the spouse's)' (p.68). Bourdieu's work here provides a good complement to Hochschild's. His arguments are useful to understand how something that starts as a highly ritualised activity can generate positive feelings that strengthen familiar relationships.

Bound to oversee the construction of the house, Tanning's narrative places her in a delicate situation where her textual self needs to perform her duties as a housewife if she is to sustain her romanticised attachment to heterosexual living. However, Tanning's memoir highlights that the effort carries serious costs. She relates how: 'Tottering home afterwards, coming into the sweetly silent house – except for the faraway sounds of Max in his studio, was, I thought, the way a call girl must feel after her strenuous champagne gaiety, when she has thus earned the right to drop and sleep' (2001, p.264). Not only does this quote highlight the artifice of Tanning's performance as a housewife, it traces a parallel between her role and that of a 'call girl.' In this way, Tanning stresses the instrumental nature of her position whilst also evidencing her self-alienation. A 'call girl' provides a service which involves her body in the most intimate ways. Yet, she never loses sight of the fact that her service fulfils a commercial exchange. It is a transaction in which she makes a gain by giving up something utterly private. Describing how she spends the day on the construction site, Tanning seems to sacrifice her time and energy, but also her position as an artist – at least temporarily, she sells herself. But although the protagonist is driven to exhaustion and feels emotionally distant from her role, she accepts its duties because they are naturalised. They are expectations attached to the figure of housewife. Her attitude in this passage expresses how she willingly sacrifices herself for the sake of Ernst, and her constant smiling masks her alienation. When at the end, the text concludes that 'she has earned the *right* to drop and sleep,' it implies that she has fulfilled what was always her *responsibility*. She has 'earned the right' to feel satisfied with herself because she has met the moral imperative to care for her couple. During this time, the figure of Ernst is always in the background, 'waving from his window' or even closer to her, as a noise coming from his studio. His ghostly presence acts as a reminder that her existence is now inherently linked to his, thus making her police her own behaviour as *his wife*.

Hochschild (2012) points out that, because emotional responsibilities are cultural impositions, individuals often deviate from the feelings they are expected to experience, distancing themselves from roles associated with those feelings. I think that, it can certainly be argued that, despite Tanning's insistence that she is satisfied,

her textual self frequently seems estranged from her position in the heterosexual household. The comparison she traces between herself and a call girl does not seem to suggest that she finds her role always gratifying. However, in those instants where Tanning voices feelings that stray from those she is supposed to experience, the text shows how she engages in emotional labour so as to prompt herself to feel that which her position indicates she *should feel*. Hochschild has described how this process of emotional labour by which individuals ‘try to feel,’ involves both mental and physical work (2012, p.7). You need to engage in the activity that makes that feeling visible while also inciting yourself to experience that feeling through different mechanisms. While the physical work a housewife executes might start as a responsibility related to her role in the family, this work is entangled with family feeling. It purportedly becomes rewarding because it strengthens the affective bond that is assumed as being naturally there. Following this argument, I want to end this section by reflecting on how Tanning seems to undertake this process of affective realignment by making her figurative self engage in everyday life ritualised exchanges which are meant to engender feeling:

For the thousand time I leap, filling the breach with trusty amenities – smiles, gestures, sign language dredged up out of old habit as you knew they would be. It is nothing to what I would do for you, in truth. Just ask me.

At last they are gone, have waved goodbye. The next hour – spent cleaning up, piling dishes, emptying ashtrays, feeling my way back to myself – passes in that cottony, timeless state known to those emerging from anaesthesia (2001, p.237).

While in other parts of the memoir it is open to interpretation whether Tanning feels naturally aligned with her position, these sentences make apparent that she undertakes these activities for Ernst. The text is addressed to him: ‘Just ask me,’ I will do it. She will do anything for him because of her prior romanticised attachment to heterosexual living, which crystallises through him. Yet, this anything is not really *anything*. What Tanning is offering to do for him at this point is care work, which is loaded with family feeling. The activities she describes, bringing ‘trusty amenities’ to the table and ‘cleaning up’ when the guests leave are forms of ritualised exchange

wives are meant to undertake in order to develop amiable relationships with family, friends, and other visitors.

Tanning's words indicate that she regularly participates in these ritualised exchanges. But it seems plausible to me that the statement 'at last they are gone,' registers how these activities make her weary. I would suggest that Tanning's words articulate how these activities come between the self she displays and the self she experiences as herself. For the 'thousand' time, like a pet you train to 'leap' on command for other people's amusement, Tanning deploys codified feminine attitudes which are meant to strengthen her bond with Ernst and engender good feelings – in particular among people around her, but also her own. She is meant to feel happy because she is making those around her happy. However, as she indicates, she does not experience her actions as fully genuine. Insofar as these actions position her in a predefined framework where her role is to support her husband, she seems to draw some satisfaction from them; ultimately however, and despite her good will, these actions do not align her with the feelings she is expected to embody.

The words 'I will do it for you' seem to indicate that Tanning's intention was to bring herself in line with these feelings, at least in part. She was making an effort to fulfil what would be interpreted as a natural commitment to her role of wife and housewife. And from her description, she might well have been read as such, even if she personally did not feel this role as herself. On the other hand, although Tanning does not actually accept her role as a housewife in the narrative, describing her alienation through her body, I would say the passage indicates that her actions are more than a simple performance. Perhaps she is not a 'happy housewife,' but in that moment, her actions tell us that she is not herself either – whoever that other self is. In undertaking these actions which sustain heterosexual love by strengthening 'family feeling,' Tanning has momentarily lost herself. Hence, it is only when she no longer needs to present herself through the 'happy housewife' role that she begins to 'feel her way back to herself.' The fact that the narration foregrounds her physical senses, illustrates how the performance of ritualised exchanges involves the body, thus creating feeling, as Hochschild suggested. Nonetheless, that does not mean that one would always succeed in engendering the *right* sort of feeling. Earlier, I said that

my reason for including this last quote was to explore how Tanning's memoir attempts to align her feelings with her role as a housewife through ritualised exchanges. Tanning might not develop the *right* form of feeling, but her narration suggests that her actions definitely engender *some* sort of feeling, which was not there before she performed them.

In the last few paragraphs I have argued that the last quote conveys how Tanning tries and fails to align her feelings with her prescribed role. Tracking this narrative path has enabled me to show how, as Hochschild's model of emotional management also suggests, feeling is not simply something we can work on and control. As Hochschild points out, by commodifying feeling we risk becoming estranged from it (2012, p.17). Hochschild makes this claim in the context of commercial uses of feeling. However, from the perspective that all physical, emotional and sexual activities women perform in the domestic space should be counted as labour insofar as they sustain patriarchal culture, private feelings can also be considered a commodity. Tanning's labour was definitely a commodity Ernst benefited from. During her life with him, Tanning's personal story indicates she felt deeply ambivalent about embodying the figures of the supporting wife and housewife. Indeed, the overall memoir acquires a lamenting tone as Tanning states that her dedication as an artist blurred by 'mingling with wifely occupations and colourful living' (2001, p.280). But as ambivalent as she might have felt, I have also shown that the text conveys how she strived to fulfil the expectations her role imposed on her, even if she felt alienated from them. And even if she was aware that her labour as a woman was commodified, Tanning laboured to perform as a good housewife. As she did, the fantasy of romance cast a powerful shadow on her narrative as her words rationalised the sacrifice of her creative time and energy. However, this image of idealised heterosexual partnership she aspires to embody and draws on in the story, falters throughout the text.

3.3 Femininity as an obstacle to artistic identity

As I have shown so far, Dorothea Tanning discusses at length her roles as wife and housewife in her memoir. In this last section I want to consider how she represents her artistic identity. In particular, I am interested in exploring how and why she articulates that her investment in domestic and other femininities hindered her sense of herself as an artist. Despite her lifelong commitment to art, Tanning seems to have struggled finding a stable place in the world as an artist. She has often expressed how her career suffered from her proximity to Ernst²⁵. However, throughout her life Tanning also adamantly sustained that there was no difference between a man and a woman artist²⁶. Her insistence on this point is interesting given the difficulties she describes in her personal writings. Furthermore, her artwork has consistently addressed female subjects, such as the changes young girls go through during adolescence, or motherhood. Victoria Carruthers relates how, in a personal interview with the artist, Tanning answered that women frequently appear in her work: ‘because I am a woman and I am more interested in the experience of women because it is my own’ (2012, p.8). Yet, a number of passages in *Between Lives* sound as if Tanning blamed her own femininity for the limited artistic recognition she obtained during her life. These instances in the narrative are unsettling. Although gender is one of the categories through which women are discriminated against in the art world, the quotes I discuss here ultimately locate the problem in women themselves and not in patriarchal hierarchies of value. Hence, I would argue that at certain points, Tanning’s memoir seems to foreground gender disadvantage as a personal issue or fault, as if discrimination could be detached from wider social structures.

²⁵ Tanning remarks in her memoir that her life with Ernst negatively impacted her career as she was shadowed by his success (2001, p.277). This claim reappears in numerous interviews Tanning gave throughout her life.

²⁶ Although Tanning did not challenge readings of her work which interpreted her paintings through the lens of female experience, she systematically rejected to be included in women of feminist artists’ anthologies. In 1991, not only did she refuse to appear in the critical collection of essays *Surrealism and Women* edited by Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, she sent a statement of her position to be published in the book. In the statement, Tanning asserts that gender ‘has nothing to do with qualifications or goals’ (p.228).

3.3.1 Sexist stereotyping in the art world

When I began life with this famous man I was confident that I could continue as a separate, stony-sided individual. Suddenly, from one moment to the next – the time that it takes to fall hopelessly in love (I did), or face a firing squad – I was transferred from my unapproachable aerie to a nest on the ground (Tanning, 2001, p.277).

My first impression when I read this quote was that it expressed how Tanning believed her relationship with Ernst had thwarted her artistic aspirations. The way she presents her life with him in her memoir had led me to that same conclusion. This passage appears in the last third of the book. At this stage, she has already discussed how much of her time and energy went into fulfilling the roles of wife and housewife, and how ambivalent she felt towards them. Hence, with a quick assessment, I felt that this quote proved two things: the first one is that Tanning understood how women's work in the private sphere benefits men's professional success. After all, her labour had enabled Ernst's career to keep rising while she took care of his personal needs. The second one was that Tanning had ultimately identified romantic love as a fantasy which sets up the conditions for unequal distribution of labour in the heterosexual couple – thus defining heterosexual romance as potentially detrimental for women's self-realisation as individuals. As I first read them, these words seemed to indicate that 'falling in love' had made her lose her individuality. While she had initially thought her determination would enable her to pursue her high-flying dreams, love had dragged her down, firmly grounding her on the earth. The 'nest' metaphor she uses, evoked for me the dichotomy that opposes transcendence and immanence, man and woman, genius and amateur, relegating Tanning to the later terms in all these examples. The comparison between 'falling in love' and 'facing a firing squad' is brutal. Through this analogy, the narrative seemed to suggest that heterosexual love had obliterated her artistic self. However, in spite of these arguments, three lines later, the story deflects the focus of Tanning's anger (or disappointment – depending on how you read her words) from her romantic relationship. I had to question my initial interpretation of her words when I was faced with the following passage, where the story starts blaming femininity, or more

specifically, Tanning's own feminine behaviours, for the loss of her artistic self. The following quote appears to exempt her relationship with Ernst from any charges by articulating instead a critique of Tanning's own physical 'prettiness' and the kind of superficial treatment beautiful women enjoy due to sexist stereotyping:

[F]or a girl there is no greater handicap to creativity and self-fulfilment than physical prettiness.

Pretty is a two edged sword, not only because of the way the world sees you. Oh, no. More insidious is your own divided self. Divided because, like a muscle without exercise, you have become soft, you have diluted your dreams, and you have no one but yourself to accuse if you cannot deal with the resultant atrophy, if you cannot deflect the preferential treatment you get for the wrong reasons (2001, p.278).

With a sudden change in tone, these lines seem to express that Tanning felt, to an extent, responsible for her failure to become as recognised as an artist as she had once aspired to be. Stating that 'physical prettiness' and the attention and treatment you get out of it are the biggest 'handicap to creativity' you can experience, amounts to asserting here that, if a woman falls into visible patterns of femininity, she cannot fulfil her aim to be an artist. Hence, Tanning's words convey that being read as feminine in a way that meets normalised standards of beauty, sends a message out to the world: there is nothing more to you than what people can see. This passage echoes sexist popular beliefs which promote the idea that not much can be expected from a woman, and even less so if she is a beautiful one. It appears to contend that you will not be taken seriously if you fulfil ideals of feminine appearance. The argument, women who get attention for the 'wrong reasons' cannot be noticed as artists, responds to a reality that systematically discriminates against women. These views, which Tanning so straightforwardly reproduces in the memoir, highlight one of the main ways in which gender exclusion operates in our culture.

Nonetheless, although Tanning compellingly details how portraying women as shallow works as an effective strategy to dismiss them, the narrative does not take the social system which enables this form of discrimination as an object of criticism.

In an extremely problematic shift, Tanning's description appears to suggest that women, including herself, might be the ones to blame for accepting the sexist image the world has imposed on them. When Tanning says that you 'have no one but yourself to accuse,' her words reflect the struggle women go through as they confront the art world's sexual rhetoric. In Chapter One I discussed how concepts of artistic greatness and success enact gender and racial discrimination by disavowing the very biases they institute. I want to suggest that the logic Tanning deploys here reproduces gender discrimination insofar as it does not question the idea of *good* artist that underlines her narrative. She does not consider in the text whether artistic identity might not be as neutral as art discourses suggest. As a result, the passage seems to make women responsible for their own exclusion: they have 'diluted' their 'dreams' of ever becoming artists by engaging in feminised behaviours. Seemingly unforgiving, Tanning, the narrator, directs her criticism at her own written persona. The text expresses that she despises her 'divided self' because that self has benefited from the *privileges* of femininity. The passage reads as if Tanning were punishing herself for taking part in a system which has told her she should be enjoying the 'preferential treatment' she gets due to her physical beauty. Tanning seems to censure herself because accepting this type of treatment indirectly supports the prejudices of those who hold sexist views. However, by individualising the problem, this page fails to question the structures of discrimination through which the art world maintains forms of gender privilege. In fact, I would even suggest that this passage somewhat reinforces them. When Tanning states that it is not the system which needs to change – it is 'you' – you who allows the system to exclude you by giving into ideals of feminine behaviour and looks – the text leaves structural privilege and discrimination in the art world unchallenged.

All women's relationships with cultural ideals of femininity are potentially difficult. Gendered ideals often carry preconceived expectations that tend to disadvantage women by objectifying them and stereotyping them as superficial and in need of protection. In the context of the art world, creative women are particularly affected by objectification. As Griselda Pollock has argued, women have been construed as the erotic object of male creativity in artistic discourses (1988, p.91). Historically, representations of women have defined a social order in the arts by upholding a

gender divide through the roles of male artist and female model. Pollock contends further that, positioning woman as a 'beautiful object' that the artist captures through the image, symbolises both feminine passivity and man's creative power (1988, p. 96). Hence, the woman artist's relationship to herself is always mediated by an awareness of her image as the object of representation. This mediated image can be a challenge to her artistic identity as it restricts her to a single end in the divide between object and creator. In the case of Tanning, as in numerous others, this argument is figurative. She was not literally Ernst's model or the object of his creation. However, in *Between Lives* she repeatedly objectifies herself in relation to Ernst. In the second section of this chapter, I discussed how Tanning often finds herself near Ernst smiling and providing empty entertainment to the guests that come to visit *him*. If Tanning's textual self is not an object in the sense that she does not become Ernst's *muse*, she is objectified when she personifies the figures of the wife and housewife. The example where she stresses her own 'physical prettiness' as a 'handicap' effectively illustrates how she presents herself not always as a subject but sometimes as an image.

In the last few paragraphs I have been exploring how Tanning expresses that idealised images and feminine stereotypes affect her life as an artist whether she is truly invested in them or not. In addition, I have discussed how these images affect her and everyone else because they exist beyond her. Yet, I have also highlighted that this knowledge does not make her any kinder to herself as she assumes the *fault* for the loss of her artistic self. Before concluding, I want to discuss one last point through which I have tried to make sense of Tanning's words in this passage. In this chapter's final section, I interpret Tanning's manifestation of guilt as an entrenched sign of how gender discrimination is embedded in the idea of creativity itself.

3.3.2 Gendering the artist's body: a space of exclusion

The words Tanning uses to refer to the loss of her artistic identity define creativity as the ability to give shape to one's 'dreams.' To make your 'dreams' real, you need to 'exercise' the 'muscle' which will enable you to materialise them. The term 'muscle' hints at the very real conditions of production necessary to make art: you have to

‘exercise,’ practice in the studio, make pictures, sculptures, over and over, to become good and successful. It indicates that being an artist demands work, time and energy. However, even more importantly, this term also works as a symbol of creative power itself. Having the ability to materialise ‘dreams’ is not given to everyone. Creativity is figured as a unique ability grounded in the core of your own being. Yet, as Christine Battersby has shown in her crucial study *Gender and Genius: Towards a Feminist Aesthetics*, throughout history and philosophy, this ability has been represented as the preserve of man (1990)²⁷. What does it mean therefore, for Dorothea Tanning to say that behaving in a stereotypically feminine way ‘atrophies’ your creative ‘muscle’? It is almost as if she were saying that you cannot create if you also happen to be a pretty girl. From this perspective, femininity seems like a corset which once superposed to your body, impedes you to move and give shape to the material world around you. Tanning presents femininity as a physical enclosure, feeding into the philosophical tradition which has excluded women from creativity by conceptualising feminine bodily schemas in opposition to art making.

In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, Judith Butler explores how the history of matter – and more specifically how bodies operate within that history – is entangled with the history of sexual difference (1993). The co-constitution of these histories is key to understand how female embodiment is figured in opposition to creative skill. Drawing on French psychoanalyst and philosopher Luce Irigaray’s work, Judith Butler has argued that the issue is not simply that women’s subjectivity has been omitted from discourse. Rather, Butler shows that the most defining element in our culture is *what* subjects are expected to, or forbidden from doing, depending on their position in the heterosexual matrix (1993, p.23). These rules, Butler explains, condition the development of their subjectivity. Furthermore, Butler traces the source of those rules in classical studies on the philosophy of matter. She reasons that the establishment of the divide and complementarity between feminine and masculine simultaneously links these roles to properties attributed to matter and

²⁷ I discuss Christine Battersby’s views in more detail in Chapter One, under the section ‘Gender and Genius: Articulating women’s subjectivities and challenging the art world’s rhetoric of sexual difference through situated knowledges.’

form. Matter, understood as feminine, is positioned as that which can be penetrated; form, which has been credited with a masculine status, is fixed as that which penetrates. Firmly grounding these positions as mutually exclusive, the divide stabilises the heterosexual matrix, training female bodies into patterns of femininity, and male bodies into patterns of masculinity. The condition of matter is that which cannot give shape. It is only and exclusively shaped by the form, granting the masculine the absolute right to give shape. Taken in the context of the art world, the argument can be summarised in one sentence: the construction of the male body morphology gives him the authority to create.

In the quote, when Tanning states that behaving in a feminine way would result in bodily atrophy, she draws on and strengthens this philosophical tradition because she re-enacts the divide which opposes femininity and the ability to create. The passage conveys her belief that in moving through the world as a 'pretty' girl and being treated as such, her body would progressively deteriorate. The lack of 'exercise' would lead her into feminine patterns, incapacitating her for art making. The analogy she makes between becoming 'soft' and losing one's ability to create, seems to speak directly to the distinction between matter and form. Matter is 'soft.' Like an 'untrained muscle,' it is shapeless and has no strength or power to make anything. Metaphorically following this tradition, Tanning articulates a logic where becoming feminine makes you 'soft.' It hampers your authority to create.

I am not trying to say that Tanning literally argued she could not be feminine and an artist at the same time. What I am suggesting is that Tanning's life as a woman with Ernst, to a certain extent drew her away from her life as an artist. However, rather than simply portraying this relationship as the cause, Tanning articulates this distance through a figurative language that evokes historical discourses which have kept woman and artist apart. The guilt she articulates through her textual self is fed by this history of discrimination, which underpins artistic discourses around genius and creativity. These discourses are core to the art world, and they sustain the system of exclusion through which patriarchal privilege is reproduced. Relying on these discourses, Tanning's guilt can be read as manifestation of structural discrimination, which visibly asserts that women can be artists, but then punishes them for their

femininity. As an end to this section, and to return to the beginning of the chapter, I want to include one last quote which connects Tanning's artistic loss and ambivalence with her role as Ernst's wife:

All this time I stood there, understanding little, and aware of myself as no more than an object blown off in the street, something or someone so extraneous and out of place that the entire absurdity of my presence there was concentrated for me in the silk flower I wore in my hair. My frivolous gesture, pinning on a flower at seven thirty, showed me up, at ten, as a rank outsider. It did not, however, prevent Max from grasping my hand and pulling me with him from the room a few minutes later (2001, p.77).

In this passage, Tanning has just witnessed a quarrel between André Breton, critic and founder of the surrealist movement, and Ernst, who was the movement's most iconic visual artist. The group is in a restaurant. In addition, a number of Ernst's surrealist artist friends are also present there. Tanning narrates how she observes the discussion without taking part in it. Relating her impressions retrospectively, the quote powerfully illustrates her difficulties positioning herself in relation to the art world. I would argue that this quote reflects her insecurity in this context, both towards her roles as artist and as a woman. The passage articulates here some of the same ideas present in the previous quote, mainly the opposition between artistic identity and femininity, but her words are more concrete than earlier. They detail a particular action which marks Tanning as feminine, and consequently makes her feel utterly inadequate: pinning a 'flower' in her hair.

Excluded from the argument, Tanning states that she feels irrelevant and 'out of place' in that space. From her point of view, she is like an object found there by chance, an 'extraneous' thing 'blown out in the street.' As an 'extraneous' object, Tanning's presence *should* surprise anyone who would notice it. However, nobody in this scene seems surprised by her being there. However, they do not interact with her either. I want to propose that *that* might in fact be the problem. She is surely not treated as an artist, but she is not addressed as a person either insofar as no one engages with her. As I outlined in the Introduction to this thesis, in *Space Invaders*:

Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place, Nirmal Puwar argues that women and people whose bodies have been racialised are framed as matter 'out of place,' because their difference, hyper-visible to others, threatens the status quo (2004). Puwar explains that the status quo is sustained by the 'somatic norm,' an invisible rule that determines which bodies are entitled to occupy positions of authority. However, instead of formally declaring who is excluded from those roles, the norm works by determining which bodies represent the 'ideal type.' Historically, the ideal type of the artist figure has been the body of the white male. Tanning's phrasing when she states that she is like an 'object blown off in the street' illustrates 'Puwar's arguments as it equates her with misplaced matter due to her prior feminine behaviour. In fact, Puwar also argues that when bodies which do not match the 'ideal type' take up positions of influence such as that of artist, they are perceived as 'space invaders' (2004, p.8). Following this line of thought, I want to suggest that due to her femininity, if Tanning were recognised as a subject, or even recognised herself as an equal subject, her presence could threaten the hierarchy in that space. She would be perceived as a 'space invader.' However, Tanning's narrative makes her unthreatening because she does not reclaim the position of artist. Instead, the quote suggests that Tanning is implicitly invested in the norms and philosophical history that have shaped ideas of creative identity in opposition to femininity. Consequently, she positions herself as matter 'out of place.'

What we get in the quote seems almost like an interior monologue where Tanning represents her perception of herself. Tanning's words again attribute her emotional alienation to the personal feminine ritual she has engaged in earlier: making herself beautiful for the dinner. She defines this ritual as a 'frivolous gesture' which is in direct opposition to artistic identity, and therefore, only she can be considered responsible for investing herself into that role. Marking her as a 'pretty' woman, the 'silk flower' she wears in her hair becomes the object through which she defines herself an 'object out of place.' She cannot be an artist is she is objectified as a 'pretty' woman. To the extent that she pinned that 'flower' out of her own will, the scene conveys that she is liable for her own exclusion among these famous men and their artistic 'ranks.' However, my argument is that, on the contrary, her feeling 'out of place' should be interpreted as the result of structural discrimination for it is not

based on some arbitrary actions. It is based on very specific feminine behaviours culturally and dishonestly framed as trivial.

The position I suggest Tanning puts forward through this final quote is extremely similar to the one I discussed before. I have shown how, in her rationale, femininity becomes a sign which conflicts with artistic identity: an artist would not have behaved in such a 'frivolous' manner – read feminine vanity here – and so, in self-punishing alignment with sexist structures, she positions herself as an 'outsider.' However, this passage is different from the previous one in that it re-establishes the possibility for her to integrate the art world through her proximity to Ernst. Returning to the romanticised narrative of heterosexual love, Tanning relates that Ernst does not exclude her from his life despite her status as an 'outsider.' At the end of the first section, I argued that when Ernst entered Tanning's life he concentrated in his persona her artistic and her romantic desires. Pushing aside all the other events happening in her life at that moment, Ernst became her exclusive means of access to artistic success and heterosexual romance. So, even later in the text, when Tanning articulates how she feels alienated from the art world because sexist structures tell her that her gender makes her unfit as an artist, the promises Ernst embodies still provide her with hope. Although it might not be the same route other artists have followed, her deep attachment to the fantasy of heterosexual love leads her to trust she still has a chance to fulfil her desire to be an artist, whilst being a woman: Ernst. I have argued Ernst works in Tanning's narrative as a gatekeeper. He enables her textual self a *different* form of access to the art world. I began this chapter talking about doors and privilege. If we consider an artistic movement as a room which gives meaning to one's creative production, then, Ernst was able to grant Tanning access to one of these rooms. Maybe he took her 'hand' and pulled her 'with him' when he left the surrealists' dinner party, but he had the privilege to return to that room at will. And in her memoir, Tanning relates how, when he eventually went back in, he took her with him. It did not give her the same status he held, but it brought her close to the surrealists' world. Proximity to privilege grants *relative* privilege.

Conclusion



Figure 2: Max Ernst and Dorothea Tanning, Sedona, Arizona, by Lee Miller, 1946.

This photograph of Tanning and Ernst in their home, in the middle of the Arizona desert, represents for me much of what I have been discussing in this chapter. In that house, isolated and living miles away from anyone else, Tanning and Ernst stand back to back. His gaze is directed at the outside world. Hers, her body turned towards the inside, looks at one of her paintings, which depicts an image of motherhood, one of the most traditional and essentialising archetypes of female experience. Their positions, the way their bodies are oriented in that space, stands as a metaphor of their roles in the world. He, relying on her support, the strength of her back, kept rising as a famous artist. She, through her proximity to him, came to embody domestic femininities, but also felt sustained by him to go on being an artist. Drawing on Tanning's memoirs in this chapter I have explored how she crafted her textual self. I argued that from the moment Ernst entered her personal space, he changed it and she assumed the roles of wife and housewife. I examined how she struggled to meet the demands of these roles but refused to relinquish them because they carried a

fantasy of romantic and creative partnership. And finally, I analysed the ways in which femininity hindered her sense of herself as an artist.

Throughout the chapter, focusing on moments where Tanning's textual self shifts or is more uncertain, enabled me to explore the difficulties she faced in shaping her artistic identity and how she negotiated them. In this light, I believe that Tanning creates a very ambivalent image of herself in her memoir. This is not to say that I know Tanning or that she was not strong or independent. My reading in this thesis deals exclusively with her autobiographical writing. As such, it is partial. In fact, as I highlighted in the introduction of this chapter, her artistic work as well as her written fiction, the novel *Chasm*²⁸, depict a world where women are determined and work with each other without the need for men's help or presence. The young protagonist of *Chasm*, Destina Thomas, descends from a long lineage of extraordinary women, all an each one of them called Destina, all and each one of them passing their force and identity to the next generation. I believe that it is not a coincidence Destina's initials match those of Tanning. Destina Thomas might be as much a part of Dorothea Tanning as her own textual self is in *Between Lives*.

²⁸ In 2017, the first study of Dorothea Tanning's long out of print only novel *Chasm* was published: *A Surrealist Stratigraphy of Dorothea Tanning's Chasm* (Catriona McAra, 2017).

Chapter Four: Leonora Carrington's short stories: departing from the patriarchal household and entering the *natural world* to become an artist

4 Introduction

A story about shoes runs in my family. When my grandma meets someone new related to me, she enjoys telling them about the lace up biker boots I wore in my childhood. I was a very active kid, and so my mum almost exclusively got this type of shoes for me, because they were the only ones sturdy enough to withstand my energy. Despite this, my grandma had to get them repaired every two or three weeks as the soles would come unstuck, they would crack, the laces would break, and even the leather would sometimes tear. Examining the broken shoes once again, the cobbler said to my grandma one day: 'I have never seen a young boy as destructive as yours.' I was not there. 'Oh, no, she is a girl!' she said. He would not believe her.

The cobbler doubted my grandmother's word because he could not reconcile his idea of a little girl with this turbulent shoe-breaking monster. The image did not fit with the expectations society places on little girls as *delicate creatures*. When in *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir argues that femininity is not inherent, she is adamant that woman is taught to assume her condition from childhood by her closest guardians. She states that '[i]f well before puberty... [the girl] appears as sexually specified... it is... because... her vocation is imperiously breathed into her from her first years of life' (2011, p.293). In de Beauvoir's existentialist philosophy, a human defines its existence through what it does, realising its potential through social and intellectual projects that lead the subject towards greater freedom (p.17). In woman's case, however, de Beauvoir contends that this process is thwarted because everything in her education pushes her to renounce this impulse towards transcendence. Through myths of femininity, woman is led to forsake experience to become an idol, an Other against which man defines himself, and who cannot realise her potential because 'she does not do anything' (p.280). However, de Beauvoir postulates that it is only when she grows up that the girl discovers the alterity society has destined her to, goes

against her nature as an autonomous subject. Grasping her existence as a woman, she tells us, the girl learns that '[t]he sphere she belongs to is closed everywhere, limited, dominated by the male universe: as high as she climbs, as far as she dares to go, there will always be a ceiling over her head, walls that block her path' (p.322). These are the walls of the patriarchal household, which figuratively and materially enclose woman in a traditional destiny that shapes her behaviour, her image, and her possibilities. The family house is the place where the daughter is literally schooled to step into womanhood, reproducing in this way bourgeois femininity. In this space, de Beauvoir describes, 'her ears are filled with the treasures of feminine wisdom... [and] virtues' (2011, p.306), virtues that include taking care of your appearance, and most certainly, not breaking your shoes.

The familial household, though an actual space, is also an abstract notion insofar as patriarchy seems, in de Beauvoir's work, like an all-pervasive force which affects all women equally. In the foreword to the book's new translation, feminist theorist Sheila Rowbotham points out that the lack of historical specificity in de Beauvoir's arguments occludes differences between women, not taking into account how 'leeway to live your life, [and] ideas of entitlement emerge from such distinctions' (2011, p.xvi). De Beauvoir portrays the condition of women of her class as universal, mostly ignoring working-class and Black women's experiences; to acknowledge such differences would require a different theoretical approach (p.xvi). Although this seriously limits the text, de Beauvoir perspective is useful for me to frame Carrington's autobiographical writing in this chapter because the artist was, like the philosopher, also raised in a Catholic bourgeois family. Therefore, when analysing Carrington's representation of the patriarchal household's constraints here, I do not propose her vision as universal. Rather, I examine Carrington's writing as portraying and criticising material rules and traditions which seek to reproduce a particular class, whiteness, and its idealised social form, the nuclear bourgeois family.

Leonora Carrington²⁹ was born in a family of the English upper middle class in Lancaster. To meet her mother's aristocratic aspirations, throughout her childhood and youth, she was educated to become a *lady*. She was trained to embody myths and ideals of femininity: to be gentle, to be married, not to work, and to take care of her home. The expectations Carrington's parents imposed on her were common in her social circle. She would take her place in the world by assuming the undying Victorian model of the woman in the house, or like Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have also named it following Virginia Woolf, 'the domestic angel' (1979/2000, p.17). Indeed, as Victorian literature scholar Myra Stark explains in relation to Florence Nightingale's *Cassandra*, for middle and upper-class women, it was 'unthinkable' to be seen as anything other than wives and mothers (1852/1979, p.5). Both Carrington's personal trajectory and her writing reflect the longevity of this gendered model much after the era it emerged. Fighting against this 'destiny' however, Marina Warner tells us how from a young age Carrington was unruly and resisted her family's efforts to push her into feminised roles (1989a, pp.4-5). Such as in the examples de Beauvoir draws on in *The Second Sex*, a little girl in Carrington's story *The Stone Door* protests: '“They all hate me because I am a girl. Little girls can't do the same things as little boys, they say. It isn't true. I can kick harder than Gerard and I don't allow him to draw horses”' (1989b, p.98). Gerard was in real life, Carrington's brother. Repeatedly expelled from religious schools as she was growing up, Carrington's will for autonomy peaked in her decision to become an artist. Her family met her decision with dismay but could do little to stop her when she left the household to fulfil this *dream*.

²⁹ Carrington has become increasingly famous in recent years. In 2015, whilst I conducted this research, Tate Liverpool showcased a retrospective of her work. On the centenary of her birth two years later, and a new biography about Carrington written by the artist's cousin, Johanna Moorhead, came out, *The Surreal Life of Leonora Carrington* (2017). It was followed by an academic monograph, *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde* (Catriona McAra, 2017), and both Silver Press and Dorothy, a Publishing Project issued new editions of her short stories. The publication of these books was accompanied by multiple public readings, a panel at the Charleston Festival, and an exhibition at Cubitt Gallery inspired by the stories: 'Houses are Really Bodies: Escape, Defiance and Friendship in the writing of Leonora Carrington.'

In this chapter, I follow Carrington through her autobiographical stories, in her trajectory from the patriarchal household to the outside world. I begin with her as a young girl, when she is first confronted with the demands of femininity, to then explore how she uses her defiant alter-egos to distance herself from the dutiful daughter's 'sexually specified... vocation.' My goal in focusing on Carrington's departure from the path to womanhood is to analyse the terms in which this good daughter figure is imposed on young girl's lives, potentially limiting their future. I am interested in how Carrington challenges these restraints, opening herself to creative identity by portraying her textual self as a rebellious daughter instead. In particular, I examine how her revolt materialises in her literal and symbolic attack on the domestic space, whilst all that represents artistic freedom comes to be located in nature and the wild animal realm.

I build my analysis on a selection of three surrealist short stories Carrington wrote between 1937 and 1940, when she was living in France with Max Ernst after leaving her sheltered existence in Lancashire. Until their republication in 2017, Carrington's stories had been collected in two volumes edited by Marina Warner in 1989: *The House Of Fear: Notes from Down Below* (1989a) and *The Seventh Horse & Other Tales* (1989b)³⁰. Alongside scholars such as Annette Levitt (1999; 1996) and Deborah Gaensbauer (1994), I too see a parallel between many of the stories in these volumes and Carrington's revolt against domestic life, as well as her actual journey towards artistic self-realisation. It can be argued that the stories read more like literary creations than autobiographical writings. However, most of them can be interpreted as *romans à clef*. *Romans à clef* are tales based on real life persons and events but masked with a layer of fiction. Warner comments that autobiographical elements are particularly apparent in the story *Little Francis* (1989a, p.9). However, while other tales such as *The Oval Lady* or *The Seventh Horse* might take more creative liberties, I will show throughout this chapter that the characters are also identifiable as alter egos of Carrington herself, Ernst, and others. The chapter is divided into two main

³⁰ Silver Press has published the stories under the title: *The Debutante and Other Stories* (2017). Dorothy, a Publishing Project has issued them as: *The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington* (2017). The quotes I draw on in this chapter come for the 1989 Virago editions.

sections. The first part considers the young girl's resistance to conform with patriarchal authority. I discuss images of domestic containment as a symbol of self-abnegation against which Carrington articulates her creative impulses. In the second section, I examine how Carrington redefines the figure of the *femme-enfant*, combining it with animal features, to craft her artistic persona. Finally, I show how her protagonists' autonomy as women artists is nonetheless always threatened by their potential reinscription as wives.

It is significant to state that Carrington's stories are more than personal anecdote. Combining magical creatures of the Irish faery lore she inherited from her mother, the dark atmospheres and humour of Gothic English fiction, and details of her own everyday life, these tales ironically comment on customs and social values Carrington opposed. Throughout the stories, the imagery of the patriarchal household recurs in the artist's writing as an oppressive force the young girl seeks to free herself from. Exploring how Carrington represents these spaces and the characters within them, this chapter suggests that she eventually succeeds when taking her literary alter egos *outdoors*³¹.

³¹ Interestingly, for all the times her characters *escape* the patriarchal household in her stories, in the documentary *The Flowering of the Crone* (2009) Carrington states: 'Do you think anybody escapes their childhood? I don't think we do.'

4.1 Growing indoors: the family home



Figure 3: debutante Leonora Carrington and her mother, Maurie Moorhead, at her presentation to King George V, by unknown, 1935.

As was customary for a wealthy young woman coming of age at the beginning of the century, Leonora Carrington was presented at the court of King George V and Queen Mary in 1935. She was eighteen years old and was led by her parents who expected her to soon make her entrance into society. Popular story tells that Carrington carried a copy of Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* to entertain herself during the ceremony. The truth of this anecdote seems implausible, among other things because the novel was not published until 1936. However, Joanna Moorhead states in *Surreal Friends* (2010) that on a later visit to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot Carrington did in fact spend the afternoon reading Huxley's book when she was not allowed to bet (p.36). Carrington's biography is surrounded by myths, which, like this one, possibly exaggerate her contempt for her family and social class. They serve to underscore her rebellious character and portray her as a passionate young woman

unwilling to comply with the roles of her time and position in society. But while the stories should not always be taken at face value, when I look at this image of her with her mother at the royal presentation ceremony, I find it less difficult to see some discomfort in her attitude. Anecdotes that emphasise Carrington's wilfulness probably tint my interpretation, but perhaps too this discomfort I read in the photograph hints at the young girl's insubordination to tradition and social rules. In one of Carrington's most famous stories, *The Debutante* (1939), the protagonist abhors the idea of attending a ball given in her honour. She is so reluctant to attend the event that she ends up sending a hyena in her place. Bettina Knapp reads this story as a failed rite of passage where the girl refuses to enter the mother's order of 'convention and conformism' (1977, p.526). Instead, she follows her animal instincts, embodied in the hyena.

With these thoughts as a preface and for the purposes of this chapter, I want to propose this photograph as an anchor point to mark Carrington's position before departing from the patriarchal household and beginning a more autonomous life. I would argue that Carrington looks tense in the image. Whilst she is fully dressed and made up for the occasion, the dark lipstick does not hide the unsmiling and impatient expression of her face, nor does the satin gown mask the tension of her body, standing unnaturally straight, arms along her torso with her hand firmly gripping her fan, rather than just holding it. The outfit, such as in Knapp's description of the disguised hyena, fits 'awkwardly' on Carrington's body (1977, p.527). She seems to be there because she *has* to be there. But within a year of this image being taken, Carrington would turn her back on everything she had been due to become, meeting Ernst and leaving England to become an artist. Tracking her trail in this chapter, I attempt to show how some of her views and feelings around artistic identity, femininity, and womanhood transpire in her writing. I begin with the story of *The Oval Lady*, where Carrington sets the stage for the insubordinate daughter's confrontation with her father in the domestic space.

In this first section, I suggest that *The Oval Lady* ought to be read in relation to Carrington's life on two different levels: firstly, interpreting the father as a generic patriarchal figure who threatens the daughter's independence by keeping her bound

within the confines of the patriarchal household; secondly, interpreting him more literally as Carrington's father, or at least inspired by Carrington's father, Harold Carrington. From the latter perspective, *The Oval Lady* becomes a story of personal liberation: Carrington seeks to free herself from the bourgeois restrictions of proper femininity by following *the stranger* who introduces the prospect of an outside world where playing works as a symbol of personal expression. In this line of thought, the stranger in the story can be read as a personification of Ernst, whom she had recently met when she left the family home. However, to the extent that the father might also work as an empty patriarchal figure, Ernst's status as an 'artistic mentor' makes him a potential threat for Carrington because he could reinscribe her containment into proper femininity by taking up this role in her life.

The story of *The Oval Lady* (Ca.1937-38)

Passing by a large stately home, a stranger, the narrator of *The Oval Lady*, is drawn in by the presence of a lady 'standing at the window,' Lucretia (1989, p.37). Sitting together with the narrator for tea, Lucretia appears to be furious at her father, 'the bastard': 'She ate with an absolutely amazing appetite [she tells us]. When she got to the twentieth cake she said, "Even if I die of hunger, he'll never win"' (p.38). After, Lucretia takes the narrator up to the nursery and introduces her³² to her rocking horse, 'Tartar': fondly 'stroking the horse's muzzle... [she says] "He loathes my father"' (p.40). And then, proposes a game to the narrator: "'Did you come to play with us? enquired Lucretia. I am glad, because I get very bored here. Let's make believe that we're all horses"' (p.40). Lucretia then opens the window and proceeds to disguise herself as a horse by rolling in the snow coming from outside, to which the narrator states:

³² Although I do not elaborate this idea in the chapter, it is interesting that Carrington genders the narrator/stranger of the story as a woman. Potentially this could be read as a way of representing freedom, art and creativity as feminine. Pushing this thought further, the narrator could even be interpreted as an alternative side of Lucretia - one that pulls her towards the outside world.

If I hadn't known it was Lucretia, I would have sworn that it was a horse. She was beautiful, a blinding white all over, with four legs as fine as needles, and a mane that fell around her long face like water. She laughed with joy and danced madly about in the snow (p.41).

A third character, the governess, interrupts the game. Standing by the door she tries to halt them, screaming: " "Stop at once," suddenly trembling with fury. "What's all of this? Eh my young ladies? Lucretia, you know this game has been strictly forbidden by your father. This ridiculous game. You aren't a child anymore" ' (p.41). However, as Lucretia resists ending the game, the governess drags her through the corridor, taking her to her father, whilst Lucretia kicks 'everywhere' and smashes 'pictures and chairs and china' (p.42). As the girl arrives in front of her father, he begins to reprimand her:

'It's exactly three years and three days since I forbade you to play at horses... I am afraid my dear Lucretia, that this time, I shall have to punish you pretty severely.' The girl who had taken the appearance of a horse, did not move, but her nostrils quivered. 'What I am going to do is purely for your own good, my dear.' His voice was very gentle. 'You're too old to play with Tartar. Tartar is for children. I am going to burn him myself, until there's nothing left of him' (p.42).

At the end of the story a grief-stricken Lucretia is driven out of the room by the governess, the father goes up to the nursery to fulfil his threat, and the narrator trembles as she hears: 'the most frightful neighing sounded from above, as if an animal were suffering extreme torture' (p.42).

4.1.1 No space for a daughter's passion in the patriarchal household

Every element in *The Oval Lady* points towards the enforced containment experienced by the 'lady' in the house: Lucretia. Through my interpretation of this story, I argue that Lucretia works as a fictional representation of Carrington herself, and that her anger mirrors Carrington's frustration with the limitations imposed by

her feminine position. Furthermore, I suggest that in response to this confinement, *The Oval Lady* sketches Carrington's version of a different existence by putting forward two key ideological positions: a need for autonomy paired with a refusal to grow into a woman. The character of Lucretia embodies both of these attitudes, which are tacitly defined in opposition to womanhood and domestic life. If Lucretia were to follow the path her father has drawn for her, she would have to leave her childhood behind, making a household of her own. It is implicit that in these circumstances she would then come to embody the figures of the wife and housewife. Though these roles are never directly mentioned, their existence as the young girl's expected future saturates the narrative. This is a distressing prospect for Lucretia because, if she were to devote herself to family life, she would have to starve her *desires*. Hence, I would argue that, in staging the young girl's resistance to becoming a woman and forgoing her autonomy, *The Oval Lady* both challenges the reproduction of the patriarchal household and works as an allegory of Carrington's personal story.

In the text, the imposing 'stately home' of the *The Oval Lady* functions as the core element which aims to keep Lucretia within the bounds of her position as a 'young lady.' The house is figured as a protective environment for her because of its association as feminine space. It is meant to safeguard her from the dangers of the outside world. In the story, these hazards are metaphorically represented by nature, such as in the description of the freezing and intemperate snowy weather outdoors – which comes into the house when Lucretia opens the window to let in a 'magpie,' an animal and symbol of autonomy³³. However, the most representative of these perils is the character of the stranger. The arrival of the narrator, who enters the house to 'play' with Lucretia, is the triggering incident which eventually leads to the girl being punished by her father. In that sense, the house also becomes a sexual metaphor:

³³ Numerous scholars have commented on the range of animals that work as symbols of liberation and autonomy in Carrington's work. Furthermore, aligning her work with that of other surrealist women artists such as Remedios Varo and Leonor Fini, Colville argues that they fulfil a variety of functions. They work as: 'personal totems, symbols of another world, alter egos, and mirror images, or [also] as metamorphosis of the loved one' (Colville, 1991, p.161).

keeping Lucretia enclosed in her role, indoors, the domestic seeks to repress her sexuality. But while the interior of the house is feminised, the tale constantly reminds us that, it is the father who regulates movement by controlling both the daughter's ability to travel across its boundaries, as well as *who* is allowed to access that space. Thus, the house is the patriarchal household. Imposing its restrictions on Lucretia, it functions as a symbol of women's control by men in the nuclear family.

To the extent that Lucretia is not supposed to grant access to the house by herself, her standing by the window suggests a potentially transgressive act. Is the daughter calling the narrator in? As Hanna Scolnicov details when reflecting on the boundaries of domestic space: 'the closedness of the house is a symbol for the dweller's chastity, while, conversely, her appearance at the window may be taken for an invitation or a provocation' (1994, p.54). And it is indeed Lucretia's presence at the window which seems to elicit the events that unfold in the narrative. The stranger feels drawn in by the 'pale and sad lady' she can see from outside. Thus, the walls of Lucretia's gendered containment become porous when, playing with the connotations of space, the text presents Lucretia as sexually alluring, perhaps even available, when standing by the window. Hence, from the beginning, *The Oval Lady* opens up with an act of defiance to patriarchal authority, which is codified in Lucretia's trespassing the limitations of gendered space.

However, although *The Oval Lady* plays with space as sexual metaphor, I want to stress that it goes much further in articulating women's needs and yearnings, making them the underlying substance of this story. The text repeatedly alludes to the overwhelming power of women's desires by contrasting Lucretia's dissatisfaction with her present situation with her ability to evoke a more stimulating world through her imagination, games and language. Even the name Lucretia brings to mind Lucrezia Borgia, one of the most famous *femmes fatales* of history. Lucrezia Borgia has traditionally been portrayed as a powerful woman whose ambition drove her to poison her enemies. Yet, such as in Carrington's case, whether the myths about Borgia's life are real seems secondary. What matters is that the name Lucretia evokes a determined female subject: one who is ready to use her strengths in order to satisfy her aspirations. Lucretia's aspirations in the story are hazy but violently strong. They

show that, though she might not have a frame of reference on which to build her persona yet, her demands are fracturing her role as a 'young lady' from the inside.

4.1.2 Hunger for a different life

Carrington's Lucretia eats voraciously. Her 'amazing appetite' is a protest against her father, who starves her by imposing restrictions on her life. Lucretia's hunger conjures tropes of uncontrollable female sexuality rooted in the popular imaginary. But more importantly, it points towards the character's craving for a more fulfilling life. Thus, from the start, the relationship between Lucretia and her father is cast as confrontational because of the prohibitions he surrounds her with. Saying 'even if I die, he'll never win,' Lucretia asserts that her appetites are too strong to be contained. Not assuaging them might drive her to her death but throughout the text she makes clear that she will never acquiesce in her father's wishes. The limits he has established for her condemn her to live in a limbo where neither father nor daughter can be satisfied. As famous reformer Florence Nightingale has shown, the problem with these conflicting standpoints is the assumption in patriarchal culture that women 'have [or ought to have] no passions' (1979, p.26). In her early essay *Cassandra*, Nightingale fervently criticised the falsehood of this claim. The text denounces how women were forced by tradition to forego professional and intellectual endeavour. In Nightingale's view, women longed for work and education but had traditionally been held back by the expectation that they would spend their lives entertained with 'conventional frivolities,' or as she also calls them: 'domestic duties' (1979, p.37). Thus, in a way that I believe echoes Carrington's Lucretia, Nightingale states that spending life at the service of one's family is not only a waste of resources, it is a form of mental starvation and self-abnegation. She declares: 'We [women] fast mentally, scourge ourselves morally, use the intellectual hair-shirt, in order to subdue the perpetual day-dreaming, which is so dangerous!' (1979, p.27). Women who sought to embody these roles, she concluded, denied their desires, making themselves ill in the process and risked withdrawing into a dream world. The emotional state of Carrington's Lucretia reflects Nightingale's fierce words, highlighting the daughter's passion against her father's denial. Her tremendous hunger seems to be the result of prolonged starvation. However, Carrington makes

Lucretia too determined to fall ill. Where Nightingale warns us against sickness, Carrington proposes play and childhood as an able defence. Rather than wearing her down, Lucretia's scant regime strengthens her insurgence. The more her father deprives her of independence, the hungrier and more determined she becomes.

When entering the room later in the story, the governess warns Lucretia that her father has forbidden her from playing. She responds by wildly kicking and fighting back, destroying in doing so all the delicate objects that fill the home. It is significant that the story tells us how, in her rebellion, Lucretia turns her frustration against her material environment. She smashes all the 'pictures and chairs and china' which have a wider significance as signs of her containment. If the house is gendered as a feminine space, then the objects that crowd it are, by proximity, also feminised. They organise the space in a way that channels how Lucretia ought to use them. As a result, I would argue that, when Lucretia breaks them 'into pieces,' the story symbolically suggests that she is attacking norms of appropriate gender behaviour attached to those objects. Lucretia is not simply destroying the furniture and crockery; she is undermining the capacity of those objects to affect her body in the way they were intended to. She *will not* have tea in the fine bone china teacups while gracefully sitting on a chair. She *will not* gaze contently at the pictures around her house. The narrative implies that the daughter's dissatisfaction becomes manifest in her assault against the gendered objects which encapsulate her potential future as a woman. Later, when her father threatens to punish her, the 'nostrils' of the girl 'quiver,' but she does not vacillate. Whilst showing that it is a frightening battle, Carrington's story conveys that it is absolutely vital to engage in this conflict. Lucretia's defiance of her father's authority over her life is also her defiance against patriarchal authority – a form of authority which defines femininity and womanhood in terms that limit the daughter's ability to assuage her appetites for a more rewarding life.

Lucretia's very physical demonstration against the objects that shape women's bodies into domesticity materialises her refusal to engage in what Nightingale's terms 'conventional frivolities.' Echoing feminist critiques, this symbolic gesture in Carrington's story perturbs the dominant patriarchal narrative that domestic

femininity is a natural, or even a desirable, condition for women. Renowned American feminist Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who early in the century argued that women are not inherently good at performing domestic tasks, states in her writing that what keeps women in this role is a tradition rooted in feeling. This tradition, she adds, maintains the fantasy that women's presence in the home makes it the sacred haven of family (1903/2012, p.34). In *The Home: Its Work and Influence*, Gilman contends that these feelings impede us seeing the reality that women's work in the house is labour, in the same way that work outside the house is labour (p.98). Furthermore, Gilman points out that housework is unskilled labour because women are not specialised in one task at which they excel. They need to perform a multitude of duties for which they are untrained. Through this argument, Gilman achieves two goals. She makes a strong case to de-essentialise the role of housewife as intrinsic to woman and establishes the need for a better social system to meet domestic needs. In her view, such a system would free women's time from domestic labour, thus enabling them to become autonomous subjects by participating in public life.

At the core of Gilman's critique is her feud with *the home* as a material entity that has pernicious effects on the minds and bodies of women, making them weak and exhausted. In Gilman's view, home life, the space and activities women perform in the home, make them develop a particular kind of feminine 'degrading abnegation' (1903/2012, p.178). I would argue that Gilman's perspective here resonates with the one Carrington attributes to Lucretia. Like Gilman's, the character's desires are oriented toward the outside world and the patriarchal household becomes her immediate enemy because that particular space institutes domesticity as woman's natural condition. In this light, when Lucretia fights back against the governess and destroys the material environment around her, her actions acquire deeper implications – the ultimate of which is that she thwarts social relations which seek to make her docile and dutiful. By wrecking the house, she undoes its spatial ability to determine her existence.

Gilman's extreme rejection of the home comes from her belief that women's position as housewives keep them in a stage of 'arrested development' (2012, p.166). It is a claim that she bases on extremely essentialist and problematic notions of social

Darwinism. Accordingly, she positions the public realm and all it embodies at a further stage in evolution. By demanding women's participation in public life without changing the terms of what public life involves, Gilman implicitly suggests that those activities that have historically been performed in public spaces are more valuable – never mind that these activities have most often been gendered as masculine³⁴. In addition, describing public life in America as the pinnacle of progress, she conflates the private and public divide with the East and West divide. Thus, Gilman unabashedly asserts that domestic life cannot do for 'the daughter of free, active, intelligent, modern America' (2012, p.260). Gilman's claims originate from a specific liberal socialist feminist perspective. As such, they demonstrate the strength of white western privilege to determine desires and value, as intrinsically sexist and ethnocentric as these might be. Nonetheless, although the terms in which she frames public life are severely problematic, it is important to stress that they illustrate a very real desire for autonomy and fulfilment that comes from her relative disadvantage as a woman. And I call it relative because we might wish to reconsider whether domesticity can be dismissed as inferior or unsatisfying in absolute terms. Yet, to the extent that it is a position women in the same social class as Gilman had been restricted to by tradition, while male autonomous subjectivity accrued symbolic value, it is understandable that the author would present public life as the path to self-fulfilment. In *The Oval Lady*, Carrington mirrors this outlook. She distances Lucretia from forms of femininity bound to the home and the family whilst orienting her character's longings towards a romanticised outside world filled with fascinating animals and strangers.

4.1.3 Refusing to grow into a woman

Despite her strong yearning to explore the outside world in the story, Lucretia seems to have been barred from doing so. Her boredom and frustration with her father

³⁴ Interestingly, Gilman's views on public space as more developed than private space are visible in her perspective on art. According to Gilman, there is no room whatsoever for creativity in the domestic space. Her statement 'Domestic art is almost a contradiction in terms' (2012, p.56) dismisses a whole lineage of female artists who worked in the home, and imposed an unbridgeable gap between women's roles and art.

indicates that he has outlawed her desire to access this space by keeping her housebound. I would argue that this course of action highlights how threatening the daughter's independence is for patriarchal culture. Reproduction requires that the daughter follow the pattern by which she will develop from girl into young lady. However, while acknowledging this reality, Carrington also provides her character with tools to contest her father's prohibition. She gives her emotional autonomy that Lucretia manifests in her refusal to grow into a woman, thus disrupting the process of linear progression which normalises and secures normative femininity. Feminist and queer theorist Kathryn Stockton explains in *The Queer Child* that all children are expected to grow into adulthood through a 'vertical movement upwards' which will lead them to become heterosexual women and men (2009, p.4). Until that time, their behaviour does not always concord with gender patterns we ascribe to adults. In fact, it is key to Stockton's argument that sometimes children are not supposed to fit into these patterns at all because they cannot yet be seen as sexual (2009, p.7). Their presumed innocence exempts them from being perceived as women and men. Stockton suggests that, caught in this context, children use metaphor and fantasy to develop their own forms of growth. They 'grow sideways,' or in a way that is not oriented towards their future as potential adults. They grow in the sense that they create a space for the existence of their motives and desires. It is a growth that takes place 'to the side of cultural ideals' (Stockton, 2009, p.13). In this space, she adds, their full existence is 'delayed.' And I want to suggest that it is in this area of temporary *freedom*, before growth can occur, that the character of Lucretia chooses to reside. Because the prospect of growing into a wife, a housewife, maybe a mother, is so unattractive to Lucretia, she refuses to grow altogether. To an extent, it could even be argued that the character responds to queer literary critic Lee Edelman's call against reproductive futurism (2004). If she remains a child herself, the girl cannot partake in the logic of heteronormative and heterosexual reproduction. Frozen in time, she invests herself in an alternative political reality. Being a girl enables Lucretia to grow sideways, opening up the possibility for her creativity to flourish and to feed her hunger for life. Although she is not a child in terms of her assumed age in the story, her childlike behaviour stops her from being treated like a woman. In giving Lucretia this attitude, Carrington allows the character to regain the liberty she had once enjoyed.

Playing with the rocking horse brings Lucretia back to childhood, when she was not restricted. It brings her back to the time she was not yet a ‘young lady,’ and thus, she was free to run wild and fulfil her wishes, such as when she is playing with the narrator and she laughs ‘with joy’ and dances ‘madly in the snow.’ ‘As for dreams [Stockton says]... our futures grow sideways whenever they can’t be envisioned as futures – due to forceful obstacles, forms of arrest, or our wish to be suspended in the amplitude of “more,” as in our simply wanting more time, more pleasure, more leisure, more luxury, even more destruction’ (2009, p.52). As I have been detailing in this section, the generic patriarchal figure in the story curtails any alternative futures the daughter might wish to pursue. But in Carrington’s hands, Lucretia wants more. She dreams of a different life, and I would argue that the rocking horse represents her autonomy and her attempt to reach for it. The toy materialises in the present her desire for a more exciting future, allowing her to overcome the obstacles her father has raised against her. Lucretia’s statement that Tartar ‘loathes’ her father indicates that she loathes patriarchal rule³⁵. That favourite toy is the object that materialises her will for autonomy. As a result, trying to contain the daughter’s determination and to force her to grow up, Lucretia’s father forbids her to ‘play at horses.’ When she does, he punishes her by burning, literally annihilating, the object that is the catalyst of her desire for transgression, the rocking horse. With this action, the father metaphorically tries to kill his insubordinate daughter. It is as if by destroying the object through which she channels her lateral growth, he could force her to relinquish this ‘delayed’ existence she has chosen and finally become the young lady her expects her to be. But as Susan Suleiman argues ‘the rocking horse –who in the end starts to neigh as if “suffering extreme torture” – is an alter ego for the rebellious daughter, with the implication that no amount of punishment will succeed in taming her’ (1993, p.112).

³⁵ Gloria Orenstein, who has explored in depth Celtic, cabbalistic and alchemic symbols in Carrington’s work, explains that the name Tartar derives from Tartarus, in reference to the Greek underworld. This space, she explains ‘is a sacred realm where the wisdom of the Celtic Horse Goddess, Epona, the “white” Goddess, would prevail’ against patriarchy (1975, p.7). Chadwick also stresses the artist’s interest in Celtic goddess mythology, stating how Carrington once told her ‘[r]eading [Robert Grave’s] *The White Goddess* was the greatest revelation of my life’ (1991, p.186).

Faced with so much determination, Lucretia's father coats his final attempt to subdue her in an apparently caring attitude. Carrington's narrative here shows that this attitude is strategic in trying to bring the daughter back into the fold of the family. The father argues that what he is doing is for her 'own good.' He appeals to Lucretia's *common sense* so that she will comply with his will. Putting kind words into his mouth, 'my dear Lucretia,' Carrington highlights how the father attempts to persuade Lucretia to realign her desires with the proper feminine figure she has rebelled against. That would make her worthy, he suggests. The plea in the character's words makes him enact what Sara Ahmed has termed *conditional happiness*. He makes Lucretia's good dependent on her compliance to norms, behaviours and restrictions established as good in his eyes. Ahmed explains that, '[f]or those who are positioned as coming after, [in this case Lucretia is positioned as coming after her father] *happiness means following somebody else's goods*' (2010, p.56). For Lucretia these are her father's, and wider society's goods. In this way, whether Lucretia complies or not, the text underscores how in patriarchal society, her punishment is rationalised as necessary because it is a cause of unhappiness for her family, and even herself. Nevertheless, by making Lucretia uncompliant until the last line of the story, Carrington represents her as choosing her own desire above propriety.

For, if Lucretia's father might destroy the toy that the girl involves in her lateral growth, he cannot restrain the daughter's imagination. More so than playing with the rocking horse, Lucretia's means to create a space for her desire is in her becoming a horse herself. Indeed, when Lucretia disguises herself rolling in the 'snow' and plays with the narrator, she engages with the *dangerous* elements coming from the outside world, and against which she is supposed to protect herself and her integrity as a 'lady.' In the third chapter of her book, Kathryn Stockton argues that animal/child bondings can play a key role in children's sideways growth. Specifically, Stockton's case study examines how the figure of the dog enables the 'lesbian child' to articulate desires which do not conform with her hypothetical future as a heterosexual grown woman. What is most compelling about this argument is that Stockton suggests the dog is both a 'recipient of the child's attentions' and a 'screen' for the child to project her own 'strangeness' (2009, p.90). What I understand this to mean is that the child

both imagines herself as a dog and directs her affection towards the animal. I would like to complete my analysis of this story by suggesting that in Carrington's work, horses perhaps perform a similar role. Appearing around the protagonist or as the protagonist herself, horses embody freedom and sexuality in Carrington's imagery. Through this animal metaphor, Carrington confers on her characters the possibility to assert themselves. In *The Oval Lady*, Lucretia is ecstatic when playing horses, and as the narrative comes to a close, it is in the shape of a horse that she faces her father and not as a girl. As Suleiman writes about Carrington: 'the figure of the wild horse, and the identification between wild horse and young woman, serves as a gesture of liberation, of power or of rebellion against social and sexual constraints' (1993, p.111). In fact, when Lucretia turns into a horse, the narrator's description matches the gendered and racialised stereotype of an attractive young girl as much as that of the animal: she is 'beautiful' and 'blindingly white,' she has 'fine legs' and 'long hair' flowing around her head. Carrington's description of the horse implicitly conjures the eroticised image of a young girl's body – an image oddly similar to the known surrealist ideal of the *femme-enfant*. I do not think this is a coincidence. In the next section, I will argue that the *femme-enfant* is, in close association with the wild horse, a key figure through which Carrington's writing articulates her creative self.

Interpreting *The Oval Lady* in the context of Carrington's life in 1937, we might take this story as a fairly literal narration of the artist's rebellion against her social class and the restrictive feminine role she was expected to embody. As I mentioned earlier, Carrington constantly clashed with her parents and the education system she followed. Her father in particular, never considered her art more than a distraction. Drawing on her interviews with Carrington, Warner relates how 'Her father thought painting "horrible and idiotic"' (1989, p.5)³⁶. Whitney Chadwick, who has studied in

³⁶ Carrington also alludes to her family's reaction against her decision to become an artist in her later novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (1976/2005). The protagonist of this story, Marian Leatherby, relates how her mother discouraged her from following an artistic path by describing it as improper for a lady of her class: 'Back in Lancashire I got an attack of claustrophobia and tried to convince Mother to let me go and study painting in London. She thought this was a very idle and silly idea and gave me a lecture about artists. "There is nothing wrong about painting," she told me. "I paint boxes myself for jumble sales. There is a difference though in being artistic and in actually being an artist. Your aunt Edgeworth wrote novels and was very friendly with Sir Walter Scott but she would have never called herself 'an

depth the significance of Carrington for Surrealism, argues that the artist's unique contribution to the movement stemmed from her feminist consciousness, precisely in relation to her insights on her family (1986, p.37). While surrealist artists in general sought to undermine the institution of the family due to the restrictions it imposed on creative imagination and individuality, Carrington's writing performs an insightful gendered analysis of the dynamics it naturalises. Though written as *romans à clef*, her stories substantiate the surrealists' critique by showing how specific social practices sustained women's bondage to the family, enabling its reproduction and narrowing women's freedom. In Chadwick's words, Carrington's 'frontal assault not on the family as an institution, but on one particular family, hers,' connects the personal and the political in a classic feminist move (1986, p.37). Raised in such a context of sexism, sexual and class discrimination, Carrington's actual decision to abandon her family and position to live with Ernst and become an artist was all the more transgressive.

The system of patriarchal control Leonora Carrington portrays in *The Oval Lady* rationalised her real-life departure from the family as necessary to follow her desires. Links between the personal and the fictional in Carrington's story are especially apparent in the similarities between Carrington and Lucretia. Both wilful and determined, author and character do not yield against the pressure to become what society expects of them. Furthermore, like in the narrative, Carrington projected her desires on a stranger – Ernst, with whom she abandoned the patriarchal household so that she could march towards a different future. *The Oval Lady* articulates Carrington's first step out of the familial house, out of the *debutante* gown she wears in the photograph I presented at the beginning of this chapter. This opening flight is even more visible in *Pénélope*, a revisited version of *The Oval Lady* in the form of a play written by Carrington in Mexico nine years later, in 1946. In *Pénélope*, the 'pale' 'horse-faced' young girl leaves the house in what seems like a solemn ceremony. She silently walks out holding the hand of Tartar, her rocking horse, while her father desperately cries: 'My daughter! My daughter! I am the master, the only master. Isn't

artist.' It wouldn't have been nice. Artists are immoral... Besides what is there to prevent you painting at home, there are all sorts of picturesque nooks which would be delightful to paint' (2005, pp.65-66). It is significant how this passage reproduces traditional gender distinctions that have historically defined crafts as a feminised activity of no value, against real art.

that so, my daughter?’ (1978, p.181) Such as in this story, I would argue that for Carrington, leaving with Ernst was symbolically a way to escape feminine gender figures and constraints. But if the author might have imagined that following Ernst would help her achieve autonomy and become an artist, her romantic affair with him put her in danger of falling precisely into the gender roles she sought to escape. Other stories, I will now attempt to show, underline how this relationship risked reinstating her subservience to patriarchal authority.

4.2 Going outdoors: the garden

In the summer of 1937, after a holiday at Lambe Creek in Cornwall with other members of the surrealist group, including Lee Miller and Roland Penrose, Carrington travelled to Paris to be with Ernst. Immediately, a sharp conflict ensued between her and Marie-Berthe Aurenche, the then wife of Ernst, who was deeply unhappy about their new living arrangements. Ernst had initially moved into Carrington apartment in *Rue Jacob*, but as Warner tells us, the constant quarrels with Aurenche and tensions within the surrealist group ‘drove them South... [to] Saint-Martin D’Ardèche in Province’ (1989a, p.7). There, Carrington bought a small house, where she would live with Ernst until the outbreak of World War II in 1940. In her interview with Paul De Angelis, Carrington humorously suggests that she might have conned her mother into paying for the property (1998, p.36). However, the early days of the couple’s relationship seem to have been fraught with pain for her as Ernst failed to make a clean break from his marriage. Stuck in a very distressing situation, Carrington suffered first from the humiliating scenes Aurenche would cause in public, and later, from Ernst temporarily returning to Paris to take care of his wife.

In the most visibly autobiographical of her stories, *Little Francis*, Carrington relates the events that took place at this time of her life. In appearance, this story seems like an ideal case to analyse in this chapter. As other researchers have pointed out, *Little Francis* illustrates the imbalanced relationship of tutelage between the older artist and his young female *disciple* (Suleiman, 1993; Warner, 1989a). Suleiman goes as far as to suggest that the narrative articulates a direct, albeit unconscious, critique of the

treatment of women in the surrealist movement (p.113). Yet in this particular tale Carrington also casts herself as a victim of Aurenche's jealousy, completely antagonising her through the irritating character of Amelia. For this reason, instead, I have chosen to explore another of Carrington's stories, which is also critical of the role of women as pupils and artists' wives: *The Seventh Horse*. *The Seventh Horse* provides a more layered, nuanced and ambivalent portrayal of a confrontation between two female characters who, I will suggest, can be read as Carrington and Aurenche. At the same time, I will argue that in this story, Carrington builds on opposite binary female stereotypes, which she attributes respectively to both characters, to set the foundation of her artistic persona. She uses the classic literary tropes of the *virgin* or 'the angel in the house' and the *monster* or *madwoman* to present the character of Aurenche as a domestic figure – on the other hand assuming for herself a more sexualised and assertive self that brings her closer to creative power. It needs to be added though, that Carrington's very particular literary embodiment of a monstrous or mad self derives nonetheless from her trajectory through the surrealist movement. Chadwick (1991) and Warner (1989a) both point out that Carrington was idealised as a *femme-enfant* not only by Ernst, but also by other key artists in the movement such as André Breton and Paul Éluard. Nonetheless, Carrington's proximity to the *femme-enfant* is far from straightforward. Others might have seen her through this image. However, as Susan Aberth suggests, Carrington's social class had granted her a degree of self-confidence by means of which she was able to openly reject the figure, and yet still assert herself among the surrealists (2010, p.38). However, as I try to show here, this did not mean that she was fully free from the influence of the *femme-enfant*.

In addition to its ambivalent portrayal of female stereotypes, I also find *The Seventh Horse* particularly meaningful because, in spite of the discord between the two female characters, there is a degree of sympathy and identification between them. By collapsing them together at the end of the story, I believe that Carrington denounces how both extreme representations of womanhood and femininity are two faces of the same coin: women are most frequently pushed to embody them in patriarchal culture, yet the narrative suggests that these stereotypes are untenable. Hence, the *femme-enfant* is, in Carrington's work, a strategy to write herself into creative

independence against domestic femininity. It is not an identity she assumes unconditionally. In this section I discuss these subjects in more depth through *The Seventh Horse* – a story in which we find Carrington where *The Oval Lady* left her, in the garden directly outside of the patriarchal household. Now that the daughter has stepped outdoors, it is relevant to enquire: what has she found there?

The story of *The Seventh Horse* (New York, 1941)

Two ladies strolling in the garden find a ‘strange-looking creature... caught by her long hair’ in a bramble bush, Hevalino (1989b, p.66). It seems to be a ‘young-woman’ but not quite. Distrustfully, and feeling threatened by Hevalino’s wild appearance and lack of ‘modesty,’ one of the two ladies, Mildred, blames her ‘silly little husband’ for letting this animal-like being in *her garden* (pp.66-67). As Hevalino tugs menacingly ‘at her hair’ to free herself and says that she has ‘been there for years,’ Mildred exchanges a ‘long look of hate’ with the creature before walking away (p.67). Later at night, when she has been freed, Hevalino returns to the overgrown shadowy garden with a ‘retinue’ of six horses to speak with a magical bird with omniscient powers that lives there. Showing her ‘long wolves’ teeth’ to the frightened bird, she threatens to have him ‘roasted’ if he does not tell her what is ‘going on inside the house’ (p.68). Reluctantly, the terrified bird relates the heated argument that is taking place at the dinner table between wife and husband. After Mildred provokingly asks her husband, Philip, about the ‘unpleasant creature,’ he becomes furious when he learns that his wife, who pretends to be so pious and religious, ‘left the creature trapped’ (p.69). In response to his anger, she makes *a scene*:

Mildred gives a shocked cry and covers her face with a slightly soiled handkerchief. ‘Philip, why do you say such cruel things to me, your wife?’... ‘I can say no more,’ sobs the wife. ‘After what you have said to me I feel faint’ (p.69).

The other lady who had been in the garden reprimands Philip for upsetting Mildred in her ‘delicate condition,’ suggesting that she is expecting a baby (p.69). Furious at his wife’s ‘fatuous lies,’ Philip denies that possibility given that Mildred, he states: ‘“has

not graced... [his] bed in five whole years” (p.70). As he walks out of the dining room, Mildred pleads with him to come back but he ignores her, says that it is “too late now” and, after thinking, goes out to the stables (p.70). There he finds Hevalino, whose prior ambivalent beastly appearance is now clearly that of a horse, and goes on a feverish ride:

He caught... Hevalino by the mane, and leapt onto her back. The mare galloped as if her heart would burst. And all the time Philip was on a great ecstasy of love; he felt he had grown onto the back of this beautiful black mare, and that they were one creature (p.71).

The following morning, as Philip returns from the ride, he learns that Mildred is dead, her corpse ‘found near the stable’ after having been ‘trampled to death’ by the usually ‘gentle’ horses. However, in Hevalino’s empty stall, the seventh one, there is a ‘small misshapen foal’ whose origin is a mystery to everyone (p.71).

4.2.1 Creating a model of female creativity through the *femme-enfant*

The *Seventh Horse* epitomises the transformation Carrington initiated when she began her life as an artist with Ernst. Hevalino personifies the rage and wild character that moved her to rebel. However, as I started discussing earlier, what Carrington had encountered when leaving the patriarchal household was far from satisfactory. In addition to the domestic fights with Aurenche, she faced the task to devise her own female artistic self. Because, as Chadwick has explained, although Surrealism encouraged women’s ‘creative activity’ and offered them a world free ‘from family-imposed social expectations... [It did not provide them] with a model for mature, autonomous, creative activity’ (1986, p.1). Moreover, as she further argued in her monograph *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, the ideal of woman as *femme-enfant* surrealist men glorified, was devoid of autonomy. Thus, though she was exalted for her power to connect with nature and the unconscious, the figure of the *femme-enfant* was portrayed as too feeble and naïve to control her talents, and therefore, only able to serve ‘as a guide for man’ (Chadwick, 1991, p.33). As a result, the dynamics between male artist and *femme-enfant* assimilate to the father-

daughter relationship insofar as, theoretically, she is reliant on him to show her how to use her otherworldly abilities. *The Seventh Horse* is written against this background and it powerfully addresses the sexist principles which underpin this figure. Here, I want to argue that through this story, Carrington proposes an articulate model of autonomous subjecthood as the character of the passionate woman-horse Hevalino, who possesses the esoteric traits of the *femme-enfant* but none of her vulnerability and helplessness. Additionally, I also show how the narrative symbolically resists the reinscription of Ernst as Carrington's patriarchal paternal figure by attributing the role of Philip's wife to another. Placing both characters in irreconcilable spaces, the subverted *femme-enfant* in nature and the dependent wife in the home, *The Seventh Horse* thus represents Carrington's transition onto artistic identity together with her rejection of domestic femininity, despite her romantic involvement with Ernst.

There does not seem to be an agreement on which of Carrington's childhood gardens influenced more her creative imagination. It might have been that of Crookney Hall as Warner indicates (1989a, p.3) or the one around Hazelwood Hall, such as in Moorhead's view (2010, p.34). In either case, the boundless possibilities of the immediate outdoors stand in stark contrast against the solid walls of the Victorian mansions the Carringtons lived in. These natural spaces in which the artist spent her early years enjoying the freedom I discussed in the previous section, have an overwhelming presence in her work. In *The Seventh Horse*, Hevalino's space of dwelling is the garden. She 'has been there for years' Carrington writes, suggesting that at least figuratively, her literary alter ego has long felt she belonged in this vast and open environment – free from social rules. This echoes her real-life discomfort with social conventions, in particular, gendered conventions, which she breached over and over again throughout her life. Specifically, in *The Seventh Horse*, the garden seems to represent an escape from demeaning marriage dynamics where a woman insistently and unsuccessfully seeks her husband's attention. Contained within *the home*, this domestic relationship is portrayed in Mildred's constant whining and nagging of Philip, which makes her simultaneously an annoying and pitiable character. She seems to have no authority or control over what happens in her household, including what happens to her. Her 'silly little husband' has invited someone else, a 'creature,' in a space that was meant to be hers, and yet, she cannot

do anything about it. Mildred is thus victimised by her domestic and gendered role. Conversely, the narrative relates in romanticised terms how Hevalino delights in spending time outside, where the garden has grown wildest. She is at home between the ‘flowers, trees, and plants... [which are] tangled together,’ to the point that when we first encounter her she is literally *entwined* with nature. She has almost become part of the ‘bramble bush’ herself. Her body, ambivalently described as neither that of a ‘young woman’ nor that of an animal, but perhaps both, bleeds as Hevalino’s movements entrap her further in the shrub. This passage appears in the story like an essentialising ritual, connecting woman’s materiality and immanence with the earth. The pull of nature is initially so strong as to capture her, but as she eases into her *truer* shape, the horse, she seems increasingly in harmony with this environment.

These two images of femininity, Mildred’s and Hevalino’s, correspond to what Gilbert and Gubar defined as the ‘eternal types’ male authors have imposed on the female gender throughout literary history, the ‘angel’ and the ‘monster’ (1979/2000, p.17). In their influential 1970s feminist study on Victorian women’s literature, the authors argued that the core function of these images was to exclude women from culture, denying them autonomous subjectivity by fixing them into images of extreme otherness (p.19). Traditionally, ‘the angel’ or ‘angel in the house’ was idealised and held as a model, while ‘the monster’ and its multiple variants, such as ‘the witch’ or the ‘madwoman,’ were feared and used as a deterrent to police women’s behaviour³⁷. But in Carrington’s work, the connotations attached to both types are swapped, subverting the stereotypes they are based on, and ultimately humanising both of them, particularly the monstrous self.

³⁷ In this chapter, I focus exclusively on the literary versions of ‘the angel’ woman and the ‘monster.’ However, as Anne Summers influential study on women’s participation in Australian society has shown, these models have also played key social functions in history (2002). In this specific case, Summers’ *Damned Whores and God’s Police* details how the stereotypes were used to strengthen the hold of colonising powers over the new territories, by promoting the bourgeois family as a moral norm.

Hevalino is in all senses of the word a beastly being. Like Gilbert's and Gubar's monster, she inspires fear. She is alternatively described as an indefinable 'young woman,' a shrieking 'creature,' 'unpleasant-looking,' with 'wolve's' teeth, and finally, a 'mare.' When she wants something, Hevalino is aggressive and 'relentless.' She tugs at her own hair, stares with intent, and threatens with a smile on her face. Rachel Carroll has argued that Carrington's stories often stage the return of an unruly female principle, or 'feral women,' which might have been inspired by her interest in Celtic mythology. According to Carroll, Carrington's 'feral women' take revenge on 'the symbolic sacrifice of the feminine at the heart of patriarchy' whilst highlighting women's alienation from human society by substituting their presence with animal alter egos (1998, p.154). Here, Carrington thus repeatedly brings into focus Hevalino's 'feral' determination and assertiveness, for example when showing how she has no qualms about blackmailing and frightening the magical bird. She intimidates him until the poor 'shuddering' animal tells her what she wants to know. As Gilbert and Gubar have argued, historically, women authors have often projected themselves into monstrous creatures so as to claim the subjectivity which their socialisation as women encouraged them to renounce (2000, p.78). Given that the monster was already defined as an unnatural being, by embodying it, women could get access to a degree of autonomy usually deemed unfeminine. I believe that Hevalino fulfils this role for Carrington as the character is free to convey strong emotions, such as a longing for revenge, and also a deep passion for Philip – who indeed seems to match the position Ernst occupied between Leonora Carrington and Marie-Berthe Aurenche. In that sense, it is critical that the character of Mildred feels threatened by the animality of Hevalino. In a classic literary sense, Hevalino's very proximity challenges the boundaries of Mildred's normative femininity, but also, from the point of view of the *angelic* wife character, the existence of the beast puts at risk the bond between the couple. Because, what Mildred sees when she first lays eyes on Hevalino is specifically, a highly sexualised naked young woman, who might attract Philip's desire – as she indeed does at the end of the story.

This detail, Hevalino's existence as both young girl and animal, underscores the influence of surrealist ideals of womanhood on Carrington's imagination. Besides being a subversive and positive reinterpretation of the monstrous woman – after all,

Hevalino is presented under a sympathetic lens – she also enjoys magical powers the surrealists attributed to women. Chadwick makes a distinction between the *femme-enfant* and the ‘enchantress’ in the surrealist imaginary, and yet, I would contend that the descriptions of these two figures bleed into each other, in particular in relation to the subject of sexual attraction (1991, p.182). Furthermore, I understand this ambivalence as an intrinsic part of Carrington’s *The Seventh Horse* as Hevalino’s shapeshifting contains and blurs together these two images. From the surrealists’ perspective, woman had an essentialised ‘intuitive connection with the magical realm of existence that governed creation’ (p.182). And as Chadwick indicates, women artists in the movement frequently drew on this image when crafting their artistic persona, stressing their ‘contact with the magic powers of nature’ (p.182). As such, Hevalino’s becoming a horse, together with her control of the gardens and creatures that inhabit it, can be read as a manifestation of woman’s connection with natural forces, as well as Carrington’s assertion of her artistic identity. Moreover, such as in the Irish lore’s mythical legends of fays and witches, which also inspired her, the protagonist’s spiritual strength seems to be stronger at night, where most of the action in the story takes place: Hevalino’s gift to communicate with animals and humans alike; her ceremonial escort of horses (among which she seems to rule); her ability to subdue and seduce others – respectively, the bird, who lends her his psychic skills, and Philip, who is infatuated with her wild beauty; all of these events take place in the ‘blue shadow’ under the trees, which grant Hevalino her mystery and force, and by extension, I argue, confer the *femme-enfant* and the figured woman artist, creative autonomous subjectivity.

4.2.2 A literary space to assert difference

In the previous section I discussed how the main character of *The Oval Lady*, the young girl Lucretia plays at horses to create a metaphorical space for her otherwise unacceptable desires. Building on Stockton’s notion of lateral growth, I interpreted the game as a form of resistance to grow into normative and constraining womanhood. In *The Seventh Horse* we encounter again this imaginary world of horses, but here, it is no longer a game. It is the self-contained reality of the story. This leads me to propose: can we therefore establish a form of continuity between

these two tales, whereby the rebellious young girl has now settled into an identity where she can more overtly assert her freedom and difference? I would argue that this is the case. In that sense, I think that it is possible to connect the changes in Carrington's life with her self-portrayal in the story, which illustrates her growing independence and confidence into an artistic self – a self which her education had tried to curtail. At one point in her career, artist and filmmaker Maya Deren referred to herself as a 'witch.' Deren writes in her notebooks that a witch is a 'successful deviant,' by which she means that a witch is a person whose behaviour does not conform to 'the standard norm' but manages to survive nonetheless (1980, p.33). However, because she does not rely on normal patterns of behaviour to do so, the witch's ability to get through life is seen as supernatural, and thus fearsome (p.33). The broader point of Deren's argument is that 'deviants,' such as herself, are frightening because they represent the possibility of a sustaining alternative order. This logic is particularly powerful when applied to the autonomous reality of a story because the literary format enables the author to figure an alternative order in desirable terms. Nonetheless, if a different form of life is to be imagined as an alternative, it also needs to be brought into contrast against the social reality it is positioned against. This is what I suggest Carrington does when making Hevalino an outsider, a witchlike creature of the night. Following the same structure Deren proposes, Carrington's creation of Hevalino relies on binaries. To make her alter ego a 'successful deviant,' she presents her against the figure of Mildred.

Under *normal* conditions the character of Mildred would have been held up as an ideal figure. As I commented earlier, she is based on the literary type of the 'angel in the house.' Gilbert and Gubar point out that the angel, a model of 'female purity,' descends directly from the religious image of the virgin, crystallising as the domestic angel only in the nineteenth century (2000, p.20). The domestic angel, they explain, is a role in which woman's main responsibility is to provide comfort for her husband and family, sacrificing her personal desires in the process (2000, p.25). However, although the angel is portrayed as devout, selfless and fragile, Gilbert and Gubar add that she also holds a dormant capacity for explosive rage: if necessary 'the angel woman manipulates her domestic/mystical sphere in order to ensure the well-being of those entrusted to her care' (2000, p.26). Unlike the monster's anger however, her

violence is condoned because her object is to preserve the family norm. Mildred meets almost word for word each of these characteristics. If considered from her perspective, her hatred and unfeeling treatment of Hevalino, together with her reprimanding of her husband, are motivated by the threat this animal represents to her couple. When called upon by Philip to explain her heartlessness as she leaves Hevalino 'caught in the bramble bush,' she defends herself by saying that freeing this creature 'would have done us serious harm' (Carrington, 1989b, p.65). Thus, in a way, when Mildred mistreats Hevalino, she is only fulfilling her prescribed role to protect her family. Nonetheless, because, as the story shows, this hypothetical danger is only visible to her, her rationale fails to produce the intended effect on Philip, who is sickened by her behaviour. Because Mildred is fixed in the figure of wife she cannot escape, Philip's further admonition leads her to use the only tools left to her: whining and crying. To trigger Philip's pity, she resorts to stereotyped behaviours which have historically, and in a misogynous way, been labelled as forms of female manipulation. She creates a dramatic scene covering her face, sobbing and fainting. Finally, her lying about pregnancy seems to be the deathblow which makes her completely intolerable to Philip, who then immediately leaves.

Whilst manipulation is justified in the world of the domestic angel woman, Carrington's writing instead presents Mildred as an obnoxious child, making her plea profoundly unsympathetic. Her irritating behaviour resembles the depiction of Aurenche as Amelia in *Little Francis*. By portraying her in this negative light, Carrington challenges the ideal that the character is based on. Angelic femininity, being a wife, is shown as an undesirable position in this story because one becomes dependent on patriarchal support and approval, which furthermore, Mildred never actually receives. In turn, Mildred's and Philip's respective frustration with each other questions the validity of the marriage norm, as this binding contract does not seem to bring satisfaction to either character. Yet, although Carrington makes Mildred the antagonist of the story to figuratively distance herself from her position, she does not renounce heterosexual romance – Philip is seduced and entranced by Hevalino. I would argue that with this move, splitting sexual attraction from conjugal dependence, Carrington achieves a complex goal: she asserts the legitimacy of

autonomous female subjectivity, while at the same time retaining the sexual potential of eroticised feminine ideals such as that of the *femme-enfant* or the enchantress.

Although challenging, it could be argued that to an extent, Carrington's use of binary stereotypes in *The Seventh Horse*, reproduces objectifying ideals of femininity. This is especially visible in relation to Mildred, who is given little voice in the story.

Nonetheless, I want to introduce an alternative possibility. In the subsection that follows, I contend that Carrington's treatment of this character is more understanding than what it seems at first sight, because Mildred is given what I will call, *a vengeance*.

4.2.3 Undoing objectifying feminine stereotypes

Before meeting Carrington, Ernst wrote about his deteriorating marriage on two occasions: *A Little Girl Dreams of Taking the Veil* (in 1930) and *Les Mystères de la Forêt* (in 1934). Although he does not directly refer to Aurenche by name, in both of these texts Ernst blames the increasing religious zeal of his wife for his growing lack of interest in her. *Les Mystères de la Forêt* is particularly objectifying in that a man excuses his turning away from a woman, casting himself as the *victim* because she has become conscientious and boring (1980, p.223). And yet, as Chadwick has highlighted, Aurenche too had first started her life with Ernst as a *femme-enfant* and muse. Chadwick tells how, at the outset of their encounter, Aurenche had been a 'ravishing' twenty-two years old girl 'with large blue eyes and blonde curls,' who had even attempted to become a painter (1991, p.33). However, her transition from young girl to virtuous wife triggered Ernst's disenchantment with her. Though it is difficult to know whether Carrington ever read these texts, she could not have been unaware of this story. Ernst's indifference to Aurenche after their original idyll might have worked as a cautionary tale for her, suggesting that she too could *fall from grace* if she lost her charm and mystery. Following this line of argument, I want to propose that at the end of *The Seventh Horse*, Carrington symbolically identifies with Aurenche. By killing both Hevalino and Mildred, she reframes the two images of femininity she had been working with, highlighting that they are intrinsically objectifying fantasies, and then, removes them from man's grasp, leaving Philip

alone. Speaking with Warner in the later part of her life, Carrington expressed with regret never siding with Aurenche in her conflict with Ernst (1989a, p.8). However, I believe that Carrington's stories convey a critique of patriarchal dynamics, and of her lover, which might not have necessarily been deliberate at that time.

The turning point of *The Seventh Horse* approaches at the end of the story, in the figured sexual encounter of Philip and Hevalino. The narrative leads us towards the conclusion that Philip's ride on Hevalino's back is deadly for the young woman because it obliterates her existence. As Philip is lost into a 'great ecstasy of love,' their bodies merge into 'one [single] creature' (1989b, p.71). This unsubtle sexual metaphor evokes the surrealist idea proposed by Breton that sex between man and woman was the unifying event through which the artist – implicitly a man – could access woman's purity and power, becoming complete. Thus turned into a vessel and reduced to an essentialised female principle, this notion denied woman autonomous subjectivity, and therefore the possibility of artistic identity. Despite this potentially lethal outcome, what the *The Seventh Horse* also shows is that the male artist's idealisation of the young woman is able to draw her into this sexist but romanticised gender dynamics, and so, Hevalino is a willing participant. It does not seem surprising that Hevalino readily 'walks towards the stables' to meet Philip as the story has already alluded earlier to her sexuality (p.70). However, Hevalino's 'shuddering sigh' as she walks, can potentially be interpreted in two ways: as expectation, but also as the demeanour of someone who is resigned to meet their final purpose. I want to propose that Carrington's writing shows how, as an artistic metaphor, heterosexual sex is a form of objectification fatal to woman. She becomes nothing but a medium. Once her function is fulfilled, she might just disappear, like Hevalino disappears, without a trace. Analysing the classical story of *Donkeyskin*, Marina Warner argues that in fairy tales, the young girl's beastly becoming stands as her condition when she initiates her sexual life (1995, p.358). Associating the animal form with carnal knowledge, the unavoidable changes in the young girl's body pull her away from childhood and innocence. Thus, though sexuality might be a means to escape more restrictive forms of femininity, as I have argued Hevalino's attitude conveys, the young woman's nascent sexuality also makes her prey to be appropriated and objectified, for example, through the image of the muse. Seen in this framework, the

passage where Hevalino gives herself to Philip, appears to me as a strategic form of self-destruction, because it draws attention to the process of objectification at work. The sacrifice is not in vain. It makes visible that at as sexualised muse, the young woman is lost. She is vulnerable to figurative death.

At this stage in the story, when the critique of patriarchal dynamics seems to be reaching a decisive point, Carrington strengthens and pushes it further by introducing Mildred's simultaneous passing. She is found mysteriously 'trampled to death,' as if, lost in an emotional and sensory whirlwind, Philip and Hevalino had failed to see her in their nocturnal ride, thus running over her. Fusing both deaths under the same event, *The Seventh Horse* extends to Mildred the logic that annihilates Hevalino. She too had been fixed into an objectifying stereotype. She was an alibi in the story, providing the background of Philip's family life. The incident which highlights that Hevalino, the monstrous self, is an image, reveals too that so is her opposite, the angelic wife. By killing both characters at the same time whilst having them birth a foal, the story implies that Mildred and Hevalino were, always and only, one woman, split and represented through binary stereotypes of extreme otherness. Eliminating them, Carrington gets rid of these disempowering ideals. These figures make their way out from the story, vanishing through the garden in the depth of night. In this manner, even though they might still operate in the outside world, Carrington is able to offer the space of the story as an alternative, where women exist as more than a picture seen through man's eyes. The only character that remains when they are gone is a 'misshapen foal' – a being that evokes the angel's motherly qualities combined with the animality of the monster – a being that, blending these two reductionist and adulterated representations of womanhood, can only be a frail and deformed thing.

The model par excellence of the *femme-enfant* was André Breton's Nadja. Nadja was a real woman, after whom Breton named his autobiographical novel, originally published in 1928. *Nadja* (1963) recounts how Breton fell under the charm of this young girl on whom he projected the naivety and irrationality that so attracted the surrealists. However, as Renée Hubert has argued, Breton decided to stop seeing her when she became too real (1991, p.725). Her situation as a woman who had been

taken advantage of by men threatened his fantasy of her. By leaving Nadja, Breton fixed her as an image in his memory. The story of *Down Below*, written by Carrington, has thus been seen as giving voice to the brutally silenced stereotype of Nadja (p.725). I think it could be said that *The Seventh Horse* similarly frees Nadja from her conceptual prison by ‘murdering’ the ideal of the *femme-enfant*. Gilbert and Gubar stated that, to allow their creative selves to emerge, women authors had to kill the aesthetics ideals that fixed them into limiting positions (2000, p.17). *The Seventh Horse* achieves this challenge, killing both the angel and the monster in the textual space of the short story. Such as in the fairy tales Warner explores, Carrington’s is a story in which historical and contextualised social conditions coexists with women’s innovations, opening an ‘opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas’ (1994, xix).

4.2.4 The daughter’s feminine destiny and death

At the beginning of this chapter I announced that, although Carrington’s writing may have at one point portrayed Ernst as a means to escape the gender restrictions of her father’s household, his status as her mentor risked reinscribing her into feminine subjection. Then, in my analysis of *The Seventh Horse* I argued that through this text, whether deliberately or not, Carrington resists being absorbed into subservience by distancing her alter ego from the role of wife and embracing nature and the animal world – a place where her artistic subjectivity can flourish. However, Warner tells us that at the time Carrington was writing these stories in Saint-Martin-d’Ardèche, Ernst ‘also expected his *femme-enfant* to be a *femme de ménage*, and to provide for the guests that flowed from Paris and London’ (1989b, p.5). In what might have been an unexpected consequence of romance, and with Aurenche gone from their lives, Carrington ended up occupying a feminised domestic role. Her embodying the exact position she had sought to avoid growing into, makes it appropriate to conclude this section by touching briefly on one last story: *Pigeon, Fly!* (France, Ca.1938-39). *Pigeon, Fly!* is unique because it is the only story in Carrington’s repertoire where the narrator is literally a woman artist, who furthermore, communicates with *the wife* beyond the latter’s grave. This tale provides a counter-point to *The Seventh Horse* by illustrating the future of the woman artist as wife. Whereas Hevalino’s self-inflicted death works

as a symbol of liberation, the death of this story's protagonist portrays a more frightening alternative.

Pigeon, Fly! begins with Monsieur Célestin des Airlines-Drues hiring a woman artist, the narrator – who is appropriately named after Carrington, Eleanor – to make a portrait of Célestin's dead wife, Agathe. Célestin brings Agathe's corpse to Eleanor, where, in a clearing of the forest, she paints losing all sense of time until frighteningly realising that the face on the canvas is her own. Nonetheless, despite her fear, Eleanor enters the couple's house after Célestin invites her to give the final touches to her painting in his late wife's studio. There, upon inspecting Agathe's tarnished room, Eleanor finds her diary. To her amazement, the pages of Agathe's diary are addressed to her. They warn her against Célestin, the 'Angel of Death,' and tell her that since their marriage, she has been fading into nothingness. At that moment, a petrified Eleanor realises that she is Agathe.

With this deftly crafted internal metanarrative, Carrington seems to be issuing a warning addressed to herself: becoming a wife, getting locked indoors, will consume you. Eleanor comes into the house as an artist, but as Célestin's cherished one, his love, his muse, the artist becomes Agathe. She dissolves into thin air. She becomes invisible while he, like a terrifying angel, rises above her, flying, transcendent. Her last gasps of life are spent trying to retain her own image, trying to paint her own portrait. This story bears striking similarities to Edgar Allan Poe's *The Oval Portrait* (originally published in 1842) where a beautiful and lively woman marries a painter, but his commitment to art becomes her demise. For weeks on end, the woman patiently poses while he works on a portrait of her. As he paints, 'the woman who loved him [grows]... weaker and sadder' until finally, she dies (2000, p.16). However, the artist is so invested in his work that he does not realise life is slipping out of his wife and into the painting. This gothic tale might have indeed inspired Carrington's own, but *Pigeon, Fly!* includes an ironic and subversive twist. Unlike *The Oval Portrait*, painting is not the tool by which woman is turned into an image. In Carrington's story, painting is the medium through which she attempts to keep hold of her subjectivity by controlling her fleeting image. Furthermore, it is both as Eleanor and as Agathe that Carrington takes up an authorial position, respectively through painting and

through writing. Against Célestin's description of her when he says, '“You will always be a child, Agathe,”' the protagonist tries to define who she is through her self-representation as a writer and as an artist (1989b, p.28). Nonetheless, the story finishes on an ambivalent note as Eleanor, despite her best efforts to assert her autonomous existence, feels cold as death. Painting alone, her artistic identity, proves insufficient to protect her from the dominant influence of the domestic space.

Pigeon, Fly! seems to convey that if the woman artist re-enters the patriarchal household, she dooms herself. Leaving the freedom of the dark forest behind her, she relinquishes any hope for autonomy as, in this space, she is subsumed under the disquieting figure of the grown-up daughter, the wife. The risk Carrington's other stories anticipate, the one that female protagonists such as Hevalino cunningly avoid, materialises in the bleak ending of *Pigeon, Fly!* through the woman artist's return indoors.

Conclusion

Carla Lonzi, the 1970s Italian feminist and founder of the group *Rivolta Femminile*, abandoned the professional and personal roles she occupied because she could not reconcile them with her political position. Lonzi argued that participating in the world always required us to engage with dominant cultural values and practices whereby women are not treated as full subjects. Nonetheless, her writings, particularly *Vai Pure*, where she documents a four-day conversation between herself and her partner, the artist Pietro Consagra, also illustrate her desire to partake in the social despite the risk of being relegated. In *Vai Pure*, Lonzi engages in dialogue with Consagra as a form of consciousness-raising to show him that he has been objectifying her. He has been using her to develop himself and his own artistic production, instead of having a relationship with her from equal to equal. Lea Melandri explains that Lonzi's request when addressing Consagra is that men should acknowledge the value of interpersonal relationships and stop instrumentalising women for their sake (2013, p.46). However, as he fails to respond to her demand, Lonzi presents *Vai Pure* as proof that it is impossible to be recognized as a subject by a man in patriarchal

culture. The aim of the text is to highlight the reasons why she chooses to leave him. As painful as it might be for her, she prefers to abandon her hopes for change, rather than support this oppressive and unfulfilling system any longer.

The irony in this demand, Lea Melandri has argued, is that Lonzi ultimately relies on a man to authorise her subjectivity instead of reclaiming it by and through her own self (2013, p.48). Nonetheless, Melandri's objective is not to demonstrate that Lonzi's model is a failure. On the contrary, she simply seeks to show that Lonzi's request for her partner to acknowledge her, illustrates how love and desire are bound up in the making of female experience in ways that are complex to escape. This is what roots Lonzi's project in the social world, making it, necessarily, an ambivalent one. I have decided to include Lonzi's example here to help me highlight how Carrington's writing similarly reflects her material experience and ambivalent feelings. Throughout this chapter I have tried to stress the tension between autonomy and romance in her stories. In my view, this tension, as for Lonzi, originates from a social environment which refused to grant women complete creative subjectivity while at the same time promoting an ideology of selfless love which encouraged them to become supportive wives and daughters. Repeatedly, women are confronted with this conflicting reality in Carrington's stories as her protagonists are drawn to Célestin, Philip and others, even when they seem to know that it is against their best interest. But like Lonzi did, Carrington left Ernst in real life. This part of her biography is complicated as in 1940, she suffered a mental breakdown after Ernst was interned in a concentration camp as a suspected enemy alien by French military forces – the events of which Carrington relates in *Down Below* (New York, 1943). It is following her recovery from this painful episode, and after she escaped from the sanatorium where she was held in the Spanish city of Santander, that Carrington seems to have decided their relationship was finally over.

Some scholars, such as Gloria Orenstein, have read Carrington's breakdown as a breakthrough in which her feminist consciousness fully emerged (1977 p.68). To me, this interpretation, in the same way that Susan Aberth suggests, idealises a very traumatic incident (2010, p.49). Instead, I would argue, as Chadwick does, that Carrington's feminist vision originated as a result of all the work she did and all the

events she went through ‘between 1938 and 1947’ (1986, p.37). Furthermore, framing Carrington’s feminist awareness as part of a larger process which takes on board the prior hesitation her stories contain, also rationalises her separation from Ernst as a consistent development. From this point on in her life Carrington wrote less, but she went on to develop an extraordinary body of painting. Her later years in Mexico are characterised by an interest in female friendship and community, and by an emphasis on traditional feminine domestic spaces as artistic spaces, particularly the kitchen (Aberth, 2012; Conley, 2013). Echoing her ever-growing concern with alchemy and Hermeticism, Aberth explains how in the 1950s, Carrington ‘saw a profound confluence between the act of painting, cooking and occult practices’ (2012, p.11). Developing this work in close partnership with her good friend, the artist Remedios Varo, she represented these subjects and immortalised their ‘mutually supportive, often collaborative relationship’ in her hilarious and spirited only novel, *The Hearing Trumpet* (Chadwick, 1998, p.10). Perhaps even mirroring Carrington’s own participation in the women’s liberation movement, *The Hearing Trumpet* (2005) is a story in which the value of female community shines above any other type of relationship.

Chapter Five: Faith Ringgold's intergenerational dialogue with her daughter: ideals of family and a mother's home for creative growth

5 Introduction

Home is a space of the imagination as much as it is a space we inhabit every day. Audre Lorde in her autobiography, or as she calls it, byomithography, travels back and forth between her family's small 'tenement cot' in Harlem and across the Caribbean Sea through her mother's words. Home is a place elsewhere in her mother's mouth. Home is a place of 'sapidillas' and 'mangos' and fresh breeze on the steps of 'Noel's Hill' (1982, p.13). In these stories, Grenada is the material myths are made of, dreams that a young Lorde weaves together so they hover above the 'rank' small apartment her family lives in. These stories of a faraway home help them endure their current living conditions because, as Lorde tells, this place is only:

Made bearable because it was not all. This now, here, was a space, some temporary abode, never to be considered forever nor totally binding nor defining... For if we lived correctly and with frugality, looked both ways before crossing the street, then someday we would arrive back in the sweet place, back home (1982, p.13).

The recurrent division throughout the text between an idealised *true* home and a barely 'bearable' material one testifies to the inhospitable conditions that surround Lorde and her family in 1930s New York City. The 'tenement cot' is cramped and offends the senses. But it is all the more intolerable because the wider world they inhabit is hostile – a city, a country, where belonging is coded as whiteness. In this context where only some bodies are allowed to feel at home, Lorde's words express a longing to *return* to her own home and leave this 'temporary abode.' At the same time, this passage also conveys a desire to belong. It voices a set of prescriptions Lorde's mother passes onto her so that she might legitimately stake a claim on the ground she stands. To live 'correctly and with frugality,' is to be on your best behaviour as per dominant norms and to expect little. It requires you to watch yourself from outside, to ensure you do not attract any particular attention. Similarly,

to look ‘both ways before crossing the street,’ conveys a need to be careful. It is advice that might help you survive when your environment threatens you. These lines suggest that if you work to become inconspicuous, in the most privileged sense of the term, and you can bear the difficulties you encounter, you might one day start feeling at ‘home,’ right there, where you are, ‘here.’

The double meaning of home in Lorde’s autobiography speaks of an investment in forms of attachment to the past that, Canadian poet and essayist Dionne Brand suggests, numerous African Americans share. In her research, Brand traces back the origin of these feelings to the moment Black people’s ancestors in the American diaspora traversed ‘the Door of No Return’ (2001, p.25). ‘The Door of No Return’ is both a metaphor and literal location which represents the historical juncture at which Black people crossed the threshold from West Africa into a life of captivity, breaking all ties with the past. For Brand, this moment of dispossession is the ‘creation place’ of Black diasporic consciousness because the passage defines Black people’s inheritance (p.5). Walking through ‘the Door of No Return’ deprived captives of origins, forcing them and the generations to follow to indefinitely long for their loss and endlessly invent themselves anew. As a result, Brand concludes, ‘some of us’ are attached to the ‘romance’ of belonging (2001, p.67) – or as Saidiya Hartman or Michele Wallace refer to it, the romance of African origins (Hartman, 2007; Wallace, 1989/2016).

From the point of view Brand thus puts forward, the longing for home Lorde’s mother articulates can be seen as a result of the historical dispossession she has inherited. Brand’s arguments highlight how her attachment to a romanticised faraway home might not be only intelligible, but also necessary. It offers her an ideal and a sense of belonging to palliate the secondary social status she is given in the present. Lorde’s mother’s ambivalent desire to make their ‘current abode’ home seems precarious. However, to ground herself in the present in this manner might be essential to her to the extent that an actual return back ‘home’ may not be possible. Thus, she shares with her daughter lessons that she believes will – if not change the racist environment they occupy – help Lorde create a small space of belonging for herself.

In the process of making a home in the present, the memory of an overseas home, personal or imaginary, becomes a resource to withstand the struggles Black women undergo in the Diaspora. It represents the image of a life unburdened by discrimination. At the same time, the notion of back home stands as an ideal which is worth striving to rebuild 'here.' In that sense, this attachment to home as both myth and desire to belong in the 'now' remain permanently linked³⁸. As I will elaborate in this chapter, this attachment performs a foundational role in Faith Ringgold's textual self-making, as the artist crafts a space to *house* her creative identity within the home. In Chapters Three and Four, I dwelled on how domestic spaces can become heavy with expectations that hinder women artists' success. However, to turn your back on the family household, as in Carrington's example, requires you to find a home beyond it. But in a world divided along racial lines, space is not equally available to everyone. Home might then offer another world. Hence, here I turn to the *making of home* in the domestic sphere as a strategy for artistic self-making and self-representation through the case of Faith Ringgold.

Ringgold was born in New York in 1930 from parents who had arrived from Florida with the Great Migration. While northern states might have been more liberal, African American communities in New York suffered from discrimination in public accommodation, employment, and education. Schools and housing continued to be racially segregated. The practice had been legalised and legitimised with the Plessy v. Ferguson Supreme Court decision in 1896 and would not be challenged until the 1950s. Ringgold grew up in this inhospitable and constraining environment. She was later motivated and inspired by the Civil Rights, Black Power, and Feminist

³⁸ Just as her mother looks back upon Grenada, Audre Lorde would later draw on the culture of her African foremothers to build a feminist community where she could feel at 'home.' For example, she references the African tradition of women's community that has shaped her understanding of relationships among women and her approach to feminism in: 'Scratching the Surface: Some Notes on Barriers to Women and Loving' (1978c/2007, p.49) and 'Eye to Eye: Black Women, Hatred and Anger' (1983/2007, p.152).

movements to demand recognition³⁹. However, early on she struggled, from not being allowed by the School of Liberal Arts to major in Art, to regularly being humiliated by teachers, and subsequently spending years fighting for representation in a gallery. Her writing in *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* (1995) illustrates the virulent sexism and racism of the society she occupied – particularly that of the art world – but also her efforts to build a space where she could flourish as an artist.

In this chapter, I explore how Ringgold confronted the whiteness of the world around her by creating a refuge in her domestic environment that allowed her to pursue her creative ambitions. Analysing a series of quotes from Ringgold's memoirs, I will argue that the figurative and material space she builds in her writing enables her to withstand the struggles she comes up against and draw energy for her survival in the face of racism. In this process, I will stress how Ringgold, as Lorde's mother does, draws on models of community inspired by the past to ground herself in her immediate surroundings. I will show how images about extended family, care, and love – such as those Dionne Brand marks as prevalent in the Black American diaspora (2001) – become instrumental in her making as an artist. I am especially interested in how Ringgold employs the figure of the caring mother as source of artistic development, and later embodies the figure herself, so as to create a supportive space and future for her own daughters. Through *We Flew Over the Bridge* (WFOTB) Ringgold shares a narrative where, rather than a drawback, her family and responsibilities towards her community are that which ground her creative identity.

In order to appreciate the extent to which ideals of family and community are relevant to Ringgold's textual self-making, it is important to frame the context in which her autobiographical writing emerges. My point of departure in this analysis is

³⁹ Faith Ringgold was recently featured at Tate Modern in the exhibition: 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power' (2017). Her powerful painting about the Civil Rights movement *American People Series #20: Die* (1967) attracted much attention among critics reviewing the exhibition. See for example: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/exhibition-review-soul-of-a-nation-at-tate-modern-68skg8om6> or <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/art-design/2017/07/soul-nation-revelatory-exhibition-telling-story-black-art>

that Ringgold's confrontation with her daughter, Michele Wallace, is critical to understanding her textual persona. I suggest that if the writing of WFOTB is distinctly assertive, it is because to a large extent it is a response to Wallace's criticism of her mother in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979/2015). Hence, in the first part of this chapter, I bring together WFOTB and *Black Macho* to show and analyse why Ringgold interprets her daughter's criticism and disavowal of her mothering as a challenge to her artistic identity. Then, I explore how Ringgold represents her creative self-making in relation to the family household, the tradition of African-American extended community, and especially, her own mother. In the second part of the chapter, I move on to problematise the straightforward narrative of familial support of WFOTB, investigating how myths of belonging influence Ringgold story. I conclude the chapter by showing how Ringgold employs writing and her children's books to take her mothering beyond her household and into her community, sharing models to encourage future generations to strive for success.

5.1 A 'good home' for intergenerational continuity

In the latest preface to her memoir, Faith Ringgold introduces WFOTB as her 'side of the story' (2005, p.ix). In this section, I bring her textual self into conversation with the image of her mother that Wallace proposes in *Black Macho* to show that Ringgold's purpose might not have been only to correct her daughter's account of their family. I suggest that Ringgold's writing of her 'side of the story' can also be interpreted as an act of mothering by means of which she speaks back to Wallace. I argue that her aim is to make both Wallace and her readers understand the origin and value of her perspective. I begin with the opening of her memoir's chapter on parenting:

As a young mother I thought that if I gave my daughters a lot of love and attention, a good home and education, and a wealth of cultural experiences, they would be trouble free. But there is no guarantee of what kids will pattern their lives after (1995, p.81).

With this quote, 'Chapter 5: Parental Politics' brings the flow of the, so far chronological, story to a standstill, openly problematising Ringgold's relationship with her daughters from the start. This rhetorical move seems to announce the significance that this section of the narrative holds in her self-making. As Ringgold reports that good mothering, 'attention,' and a caring household are no 'guarantee' that you will remain 'trouble free' with your children, she deplores that 'kids' might not follow the 'pattern' set by mother's 'education.' Indeed, the exhilarating environment and politics of the 1960s bring a hazardous youthful power blast' into her home, an explosion of energy and dissent that makes her the target of her daughters' teenage rebellion (1995, p.82). However, the narrative conveys how her 'trouble' as a mother genuinely peaks around a decade later, when the 'youthful' outburst becomes a force to reckon with as her daughter Michele Wallace gains prominence with her writing.

5.1.1 Shaking the foundation: a defeat in mothering

From her teenage years, Wallace had been locked in conflict with Ringgold. She had engaged in all types of insubordinate behaviour, including running away aged seventeen to a Mexican 'revolutionary' commune, which required Ringgold to intervene through the American embassy to force her 'hostile' return (Ringgold, 1995, pp.86-88). These events might have been just an acute yet common case of teenage disobedience. For Ringgold the generational conflict became more serious as Wallace grew into her twenties, when she challenged her mother's way of living and educating her and her sister Barbara. WFOTB describes how Ringgold had 'wanted to stay close to Michele to help and guide her,' but reached a breaking point in 1977 (p.93). In order to preserve the peace in her household, Ringgold then asked Wallace, who was working on her manuscript for *Black Macho*, to move out of her house (p.93). It is shortly after this event that Ringgold began the first draft of her autobiography, initially titled *Being My Own Woman*. In the summer of 1980, following the publication of *Black Macho* in 1979, Ringgold completed the first draft of her

memoir in a period of only three months⁴⁰. I suggest that writing her story at that time became a means for Ringgold to defend her choices against those who challenged them – predominantly Wallace. In a key turning point in the manuscript, she details how she received Wallace’s book as a surprise and a direct attack on her persona:

Michele... made me look like a controlling stereotypical black matriarch... She gave me no credit as a role model for learning how to be a woman and a political activist. There is no greater defeat to a woman who is a mother than to have her value as a mother denied... What most angered me was that Michele made no mention of the fact that I was an artist, an activist, or a feminist (1995, p.94).

With terms such as anger, defeat, lack of credit and value, Ringgold employs a highly emotionally charged language in this quote. The moving tone of the passage stands in stark contrast to the more detached manner of the overall text. Elsewhere in the memoir, events as sensitive as domestic abuse do not elicit nearly as much feeling as that which is contained in this page. Describing how Wallace ‘denied’ her ‘value’ and did not ‘mention’ the person Ringgold perceived herself to be, the artist’s accusation is unequivocal: she experiences *Black Macho* as a betrayal, the most significant ‘defeat’ she has ever suffered.

In describing *Black Macho* as her ‘greatest defeat’ as a woman, this passage in WFOTB becomes critical, in my interpretation, to understanding Ringgold’s textual persona. Ringgold’s comments reorient the narrative in that, as we continue reading from that point on, we are aware that her self-image is at stake and that her writing is involved

⁴⁰ Ringgold finished the first draft of her memoir *Being My Own Woman* in 1980 but the text was not published in its entirety until Little, Brown Book Group issued the first edition in 1995. However, an excerpt was published in *Women Studies Quarterly* in 1987 and the manuscript must have informally circulated in academic and feminist circles as Jacqueline Royster (1987), and Melody Graulich & Mara Witzling (1994) mention the text in their articles. By the time the memoir came out in 1995, the title had changed to: *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold*. This final version includes one additional chapter that covers the period of the author’s life from 1980 to 1995. Duke University then published a paperback edition in 2005.

in restoring it. The text highlights how, from her perspective, *Black Macho* compromises her image as an 'artist, activist and feminist' by denying her influence as a 'mother.' Her words convey that being a bad 'mother' would endanger the complex and layered persona she portrays herself through. One after another, Ringgold lists all the roles that she associates with her textual self, placing them in relation to each other. Interconnected and equal, not one identity among the categories of 'artist, activist and feminist' carries greater importance than the others. However, crucially, the quote highlights that all of them are dependent and subordinated to her role as a 'mother.' As a result, it becomes apparent that when *Black Macho* denies Ringgold's mothering skills by failing to recognise her influence, it is a moment which brings her entire self into crisis, and thus pushes her to defend herself.

The hierarchy in which Ringgold positions these roles brings forward an obvious but essential question about the status of mothering in the memoir: why does challenging Ringgold as a mother figure compromise her whole persona? The answer, as I explore in this chapter, is woven across WFOTB in the sustaining role she attributes to parenting. Throughout the narrative, Ringgold aims to play a supportive role in her daughters' lives, such as the one she ascribes to her parents in her own development. As the paragraphs above show, Ringgold had similarly hoped to embody responsibilities associated with her role as a 'mother' in order to keep her daughters 'trouble free.' She had wanted to 'stay close' and 'guide' Wallace, not to turn her away. She was aware of all the 'trouble' young Black girls face growing up, because she too had once faced it. Thus, Patricia Hill Collins explains that while the Black family is not free from gender exploitation, Black women have frequently envisaged motherhood as a means to resist broader forms of oppression (2000/2009, p.52). In the fold of the family, mothers can teach their children skills to trust and protect themselves⁴¹. I read Ringgold's attachment to mothering through her

⁴¹ To analyse Ringgold's writing, I draw primarily, though not exclusively, on American Black feminist scholarship on motherhood and the family from the 1970s and 1980s. This body of work resonates with Ringgold's views for it is the ideological context in which she became and developed as a feminist. For some more recent Black feminist scholarship on motherhood, see for example: Christina Sharpe's *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2009) or Allison Berg's *Mothering the Race: Women's Narratives of Reproduction, 1890-1930* (2002).

autobiographical writing in that spirit. Mothering is in Ringgold's memoir a crucial strategy of survival. It is a role to which she owes her existence, as well as a role she aspires to occupy to prepare her daughters for their inevitable encounter with racism. Mothering outshines other roles, because it sustains life.

But in her ongoing rebellion, Wallace rejects her mother's attempts to help her, and *Black Macho* thus becomes the ultimate act of dissent: Ringgold's erasure. *Black Macho* comes to represent Ringgold's 'defeat' because it denies her 'credit as a role model... to be a woman and a political activist.' In other terms, it denies her credit for teaching Wallace how to survive and resist sexism and racism. And in denying her recognition for her labour, *Black Macho* undermines mothering, consequently compromising all the roles Ringgold links with this position. However, as I discuss in more depth later, due to the profound constitutive role the figure of mother plays in Ringgold's self-making as an 'artist, activist and feminist,' she is unwilling to accept this critique. Asking Wallace to leave the family house had been painful, but it appears as a necessary course of action when her daughter's rebellion troubles the supportive domestic environment that Ringgold works hard to build throughout the memoir (2015, p.93). However, ultimately, even this solution proves futile. Wallace figuratively shakes the foundation of the family house anyhow when publishing *Black Macho* as the text obliterates her mother's anti-racist and feminist labour of care.

In an interview with Melody Graulich and Mara Witzling, Ringgold expresses her displeasure that her daughter would write about her. Her reason is that: 'I don't think she knows and/or understands my life in the way I understand my life' (1994, p.20). Ringgold's memoir does not explicitly state that *WFOTB* is an answer to Wallace's criticism. However, the passage I have analysed here highlights how Wallace's text presents an image of the artist Ringgold wants to refute. But it is also significant that while working on her memoir, Ringgold wrote *A Letter To My Daughter Michele Wallace*, in response to her book, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (2015). In the preface and in the acknowledgements of this other text, Ringgold states that publishing this letter – even thirty-five years after it was written – is her way of 'confirming and protecting my legacy as a black woman, mother and artist in America.' *A Letter To My Daughter* thus plainly expresses what the memoir only

implies: since Ringgold interprets *Black Macho* as a compromise of her legacy, she writes her own version of events. However, the existence of the letter as a letter to Wallace also brings back her original concern for her daughter. In the letter's final words, Ringgold tells Wallace: 'I'm no martyr. I'm a woman who has her own life to live apart from being a mother or a wife. I'm in the process of "Being My Own Woman"... I'm through with child rearing pains' (2015, p.75). With this statement, I would argue that 'mother' establishes her perspective as final, but she also points out *again*, that her objective throughout had been to pass onto her daughter lessons that would help her survive in this world. Closing down the dialogue with 'I'm through with child rearing pains,' Ringgold marks her autobiographical writing as her final act of 'child rearing.' She reminds Wallace how her life has been about *more than being 'a mother or a wife,'* so that her daughter understands, so that she too can aspire to *more*.

Numerous articles have been published about Ringgold's artwork and its relationship to history, race and gender politics. However, apart from exhibition catalogues⁴², there has only been one book length study of the artist: Lisa Farrington's *Art on Fire: The Politics of Race & Sex in the Paintings of Faith Ringgold* (1999). Farrington's analysis centres predominantly on Ringgold's creative output during the sixties and seventies⁴³. Her focus lies on visual arts and politics. In that context, excerpts from Ringgold's memoir serve to support the conclusions she draws from her enquiry into Ringgold's artwork. In contrast, my objective here is to analyse Ringgold's writing as a process of construction and self-making. Furthermore, I place her words in conversation with Black feminist scholarship, for as Myisha Priest suggests, they share the same impulse towards self-definition (2014, p.62). Priest's comment refers to Ringgold's books for children, but the argument also applies to her autobiographical writing in that both equally 'expose the shattering experience of

⁴² Exhibition catalogues include: *Faith Ringgold: Twenty Years of Painting, Sculpture, and Performance, 1963-1983* (1984); *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (1998); and *American People, Black Light: Faith Ringgold's Paintings of the 1960s* (2010).

⁴³ In her study, Farrington performs an analysis of the artist's paintings (e.g. the 'American People Series,' the 'Black Light Series,' and more) whilst simultaneously tracing their connection to concurrent social movements.

confronting the self... [whilst providing] a location for political and spiritual resistance' (p.62). According to that line of thought, I would suggest that by ending *A Letter To My Daughter* with a reference to her memoir, Ringgold reminds readers that her autobiographical writing is an act of self-definition. She resists being victimised by her daughter's stereotyping. 'Being My Own Woman,' published as WFOTB, offers against Wallace's 'controlling stereotypical black matriarch,' Ringgold's self-portrait as an artist and caring mother.

An interlude: how Michele Wallace represents her mother

As readers, we cannot know whether Ringgold's or Wallace's description of their family life bears more resemblance to reality, nor does it matter. What is significant is that they perceived and thus represented reality differently. However, to the extent that I argue Ringgold's autobiographical writing is in part a reaction to Wallace's writing, it is important to show and analyse how Wallace represents her mother.

Much as Ringgold claims, *Black Macho* is unforgiving towards her personally and towards the family as a whole. Indeed, one of Wallace's explicit goals in *Black Macho* was to demonstrate that Black women and men had been seduced by White ideals of family life prevalent in American society (2015, p. xxxiv). Significantly, Wallace wrote *Black Macho* in the shadow of a vicious institutional attack against the Black family. In the decade that precedes its publication, the Moynihan report (1965) and others alike actively pathologised Black women through the figure of the matriarch or the strong Black woman⁴⁴. Moynihan claimed that the Black woman was the source of the Black man's failure to integrate into society because her domineering ways had emasculated him. They had rendered the Black man powerless, thus disrupting the so-called natural order of the nuclear family. Similarly, Wallace argued in *Black Macho* that the Black community had internalised these notions, and thus Black women had become unwomanly and authoritarian while Black men had turned weak and resentful – or even if they did not conform to these stereotypes, they perceived each

⁴⁴ The Moynihan report, officially named *The Negro Family: The Case For National Action*, was written by sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan and commissioned by the Lyndon Johnson administration in 1965.

other through them (2015, p.24). Building on these ideas, Wallace contentiously suggested that the Black Power movement had been motivated by the Black man's desire to recover his 'presumably lost manhood,' rather than by a desire for social justice (p.32). From that viewpoint, Wallace presented Black women and men irremediably pitted against each other.

In addition to being an extremely controversial point of view, the irony of Wallace's arguments is that they reproduced the very dynamics and categories she sought to denounce. And in the autobiographical passages of *Black Macho*, she applied these images to her own family, portraying them through racialised stereotypes. Drawing comparisons, she states:

By the time I was fifteen there was nothing I dreaded more than being like the women in my family... Men always seemed peripheral to their lives. Nearly all had been divorced at least once. They all worked... All of them were haughty about having made their own way. They seemed to already know everything (2015, p.89).

This passage contains some of the sentences that were most often reproduced by the media in the aftermath of *Black Macho*'s publication, as well as some of the comments that, according to WFOTB, most perturbed Ringgold (1995, p.94). Not only did Wallace distance herself from the women who had raised her. In extremely problematic terms, she depicted these women as abnormally strong and self-sufficient. Wallace states that she 'dreaded' being like them because they did not need 'men' and were proud of having made it on their own. All were alike in that were 'divorced,' 'haughty,' and 'worked,' Wallace assimilated her mother, her aunt, and her grandmothers here, to the stereotype of the *superwoman*. Just as Moynihan had argued, Wallace seemed to suggest that there was something pathological in these women's attitude because they could rely on themselves alone to survive: they knew 'everything,' and therefore, had excluded men from their lives, challenging the nuclear family order.

Similarly, Wallace is equally unsympathetic when representing the relationship between her mother and her stepfather. In comparison to the image of Birdie as a supportive and caring husband that appears in most of Ringgold's memoir, Wallace presents her stepfather as 'unpredictable and vulgar.' He is a man who 'wasn't violent,' but she 'always thought he could be' (2015, p.xxxvii). In *Black Macho*, Birdie emerges as a drunk and 'erratic' pseudo-father that imposes arbitrary 'rules and regulations' about her life in the house (p.xxxvii). Just as she assimilates Ringgold to the stereotype of the *superwoman*, Wallace pushes Birdie close to the image of the angry *Black macho* who imposes 'regulations' only for the purpose of asserting his authority and manhood. His 'rules' appear to have no other aim. She has never seen Birdie behave violently, and yet, the possibility of male violence abides in her mind as a palpable reality when looking at him. She is certain. Consequently, Wallace resents Ringgold for letting this man into their household:

During those years he and my mother often broke up but they always went back together again. It was my mother's idea that she needed his financial support and his 'firm hand' to raise us. Although she was and is a brilliant artist and a feminist, I'll admit I never understood this attitude (2015, p.xxxviii).

Through her representation of domestic dynamics in this passage, Wallace questions her mother's feminist credentials. She affirms that Ringgold 'is a brilliant artist and a feminist,' and yet, immediately follows up with an observation that cancels the prior statement. If Ringgold's 'attitude' cannot be 'understood' as feminist, is she really a feminist? Ambivalence resonates across Wallace's language. If she accepts a man's 'financial support' and 'firm hand,' can she ever be seen as a feminist? Wallace has reservations. In this manner, Birdie is promptly written off as a dreadful presence in the family house that turns her life into 'a nightmare' (2015, p.xxxviii). Ringgold, on the other hand, appears as responsible, or rather irresponsible for creating that situation in the first place. No one amongst Wallace's mother, stepfather, grandmothers, or other relatives, escapes unscathed from her sharp attack on the family. Ringgold's constant return to a man Wallace defines as potentially 'violent,' dictatorial at least, discredits their domestic space as a supportive environment. Similarly, this notion brings into question the image of Ringgold as good mother and

feminist. Her mothering is questionable if she does not prioritise her daughters' wellbeing, and Wallace suggests that she does not, because she allows Birdie authority over them.

At the time Wallace wrote *Black Macho*, she perceived the 'conventional family [hers included] as a torture chamber, designed to oppress and repress women' (2015, p.xxxii). With this frame of mind, she undertook to destabilise it. But in breaking free from this 'torture chamber,' she also brought down the walls of the domestic household that so mattered to Ringgold.

5.1.2 Connection and community: sustaining an aspiring artist

More than anything else in Wallace's writing, Ringgold was perturbed by the kind of personal references to her own family I have been analysing. The image of household dynamics *Black Macho* articulates gives an account of Ringgold's life disparate from her own perception – or so her autobiographical writing suggests. In *A Letter to My Daughter*, Ringgold fiercely challenges her daughter's stereotyping of Black women and men as superwomen and machos, reprimanding Wallace for being naïve and immature (2015, p.11). But the most substantial part of the text literally unpicks and rebukes Wallace's comments about their family life line by line. In this section, I will argue that Ringgold's interest in challenging her daughter's version of the story can be explained by examining the role the family plays in her textual self-making as an artist in WFOTB. Wallace's account and critique of the domestic in *Black Macho* threatens Ringgold's textual persona by breaking the familial connection Ringgold both builds on to portray herself and aspires to transmit in giving her daughter a 'good home' (1995, p.81). In the last few paragraphs I explored how Wallace portrays her family in this text. Now I move onto Ringgold's 'side of the story' to investigate how she uses her writing in WFOTB to re-establish or at least demonstrate the value of the connection Wallace compromises – for that connection, the *making of home* and family ties, is essential to survive in the racist and sexist world Ringgold inhabits.

Despite the difficulties Ringgold and her family may have endured, the initial chapters of WFOTB give an idyllic account of her growing up in Harlem during the 1930s and

1940s. Ringgold portrays her household and community as a caring support network where people benefit from each other's help and companionship. The memoir relates how her family, especially her mother, but also the men she marries, all respectively play a constructive role in her becoming an artist. She soon begins painting a nostalgic picture:

Our family was usually extended to include more than just the five of us; there was always an aunt, cousin, or close friend living in our four-room apartment on West 146th Street. They might have just come up from Jacksonville, Florida, my mother's hometown, and needed a temporary place to stay while looking for a job and a place of their own... It was fine experience growing up in an extended family. When mother was tired, or didn't want us to go somewhere or do something, there was always an adult to help her
(1995, pp.4-5).

Unlike the image of the self-contained nuclear family, the 'four-room apartment' of Ringgold's childhood expands the idea of home to include aunts, cousins, and friends, who are all equally described as kin. This family is not set or limited by a prescribed number of roles. It stretches, constantly adapting to the arrival and departure of those who are there temporarily. Ringgold, her parents, and her two siblings, welcome the newcomers arriving from the South in the hope of better opportunities, people looking for 'a job and a place.' In exchange, these relatives become part of their 'extended family.' They are 'family' insofar as they 'help' each other get settled into a new life, overcome a rough patch, or simply share everyday chores, such as childcare. Collective living makes the household home by distributing domestic and familial responsibilities but also through solidarity among them. Ringgold thus frames her childhood, and implicitly the life of everybody else in that household as a 'fine experience,' portraying people who are 'always' supporting one another. Furthermore, the good-humoured tone of this passage remains consistent as WFOTB lists one example of mutual support and care after another: guests are always 'welcomed to dinner' in the house (1995, p.6); financial difficulties after the 1929 stock market crash draw the community 'closer together' (p.13); on 'hot summer evenings' neighbours gather on the 'tar-covered roof of the building' to share food,

drinks, and games (p.17); young people 'assume full responsibility for themselves' and their ageing parents (p.20); the list goes on.

When reflecting on the sense of solidarity that permeates these lines, Hortense Spillers' essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe' (1987) immediately comes to my mind. The anecdotes Ringgold chooses to emphasise mirror family patterns Spillers has described as common in African-American communities from times of slavery. In her essay, Spillers explains how by turning captives into commodities, the Atlantic slave trade dehumanised Black people while simultaneously breaking any family ties that might have existed between them before (1987, p.74). To survive the hardship that ensued, captives formed new connections with each other, creating alternative 'families' whose mode of relating passed down the generations after emancipation. Spillers describes this form of social organisation as a horizontal 'movement outward from a nuclear centrality, [where] family becomes an extension and inclusion – anyone who preserves life and its callings becomes a member of the family' (p.175). In other terms, in the absence of their original family, slaves came together so as to create alternative support structures by means of which they helped each other as family would. These structures were then passed on and reproduced by successive generations.

In the narrative, Ringgold seems to actively build on this image as her words echo Spiller's. As in those southern communities, Ringgold's family 'extends' horizontally creating a safety net for those living in precarious social circumstances. Patricia Hill Collins has argued that this model of family goes even further back in time. Hill Collins explains that slaves and later former slaves in the rural South re-created 'African notions of family as extended kin-units' to define 'themselves as part of a Black community' and resist dehumanisation (2009, p.55). But independently from its exact source, it is significant that Ringgold borrows a historical model of family that emerges within the context of the United States as a means to re-ground a dispossessed people. Throughout the memoir, Ringgold at times mentions her southern origins; other times she talks about her African ancestry and sense of belonging (1995, pp.40, 61, 197). In both cases, this rhetorical look towards the past enables her to strengthen the parallel between her household and this model.

WFOTB personifies the history of the term 'extended family' by associating it with the artist's own family. However, as scholar of gender, race and literature Melisa Jenkins contends, I would argue that the gaze Ringgold casts backwards does not simply reproduce 'communities of the segregated South' (2016, p.346). Jenkins suggests that Ringgold operates in the intricate space between nostalgia and activism, by which she means that the artist's use of nostalgic forms from the African-American past simultaneously seeks to move beyond them (p.346). Nostalgic forms become an instrument to effect change. Contemporary individuals might rely on structures that have historically helped their communities, but the purpose of this strategy is to improve social conditions so that the future no longer fully mirrors the past.

In that sense, when Ringgold explains that the family works together to 'preserve life,' I want to propose that she is not only describing patterns of support in the African-American community, but also pointing to the relationship between these patterns and her future as an individual. Ringgold is referring to their impact on her own life. As relatives aid her mother in her day to day, the role they fulfil institutes the context of her childhood as a nurturing environment that directly impacts her future persona: her newly organised kin helps 'preserve' and sustain the life of a young child that eventually grows to become a successful artist. In this manner, the family is secured as the foundation of all her prospective achievements. The structure they personify is anchored in the past, but as they reproduce it in the present, I suggest that they engender new possibilities: they create a time and environment where she can be an artist.

Moreover, Ringgold's portrayal of these domestic arrangements works against discourses that, such as Moynihan's, pathologise the African-American family – particularly the mother. The quote indicates that Ringgold's 'mother' is the central character around which the children's life is organised. But she is no powerful controlling matriarch. Ringgold's mother, Willi Posey, gets 'tired' and she struggles. And when her work becomes overwhelming, her 'extended family' is there to 'help' her entertain and watch over Ringgold and her siblings. At the same time though, Posey is throughout the memoir also the character that most specifically connects loving family ties with Ringgold's artistic becoming. During childhood, it is under the

mother's care – the mother who would later become a direct collaborator in the artist's work⁴⁵ – that Ringgold takes her first creative steps when she finds herself housebound due to severe asthma attacks:

Mother would prop me up on pillows in my bed. She would do her housework, cook and clean, wash and iron while I would read, write, and draw and color in my books. I can't remember a time where I was not doing some sort of art (1995, p.9).

In this meaningful scene, Willi Posey is the person and figure that turns the family home into the ideal environment for a young Ringgold to create. She gives her 'books' to colour, little 'bits of cloth' and other odds and ends, to keep herself amused as she rests (1995, p.9). However, these ordinary props do more than keeping the child busy. They engender through Ringgold's writing the picture of a burgeoning artist because, crucially, these moments represent her initiation 'doing some sort of art.' In a different context, these common childhood activities would be interpreted as simple children's pastimes. However, because they are framed as 'art,' I would argue that the text establishes mothering as a precedent to Ringgold's artistic identity, locating creativity in the everyday. It is not just play or entertainment that her mother provides her with when she gives her crayons and fabric, but instruments to craft her future. Furthermore, the description emphasises the familial household as the original space of artistic self-making. Hence, Ringgold's mother, her home and her art are all three literally bound together as the passage brings maternal care together with the most common domestic tasks – cooking, cleaning, and washing – in spatial and textual proximity to creative practice.

WFOTB recounts how, in childhood, having never heard of a Black artist, Ringgold did not initially 'think of art as a possible profession' (1995, p.20). Likewise, later in college she tells how 'teachers [actively] tried to discourage... [her] from being an artist' and mocked her drawing skills (p.35). The continuous discrimination Ringgold

⁴⁵ Ringgold collaborated with her mother for the making of *Echoes of Harlem* (1980), her first quilt. It is significant that quilt making would later become the artist's most defining medium.

confronts throughout the memoir is that which throws into relief the importance of the nurturing environment of family and community she creates in these early pages. The narrative structure of WFOTB indicates that, without the 'extended family' to support her, Ringgold might not have persevered, or she might not have been in a situation to overcome the difficulties that materialised around her. Therefore, even as Ringgold continuously needs to prove herself amidst the 'insurmountable racism' she encounters, she states: 'Once I had made my commitment I never for one moment doubted my ability to become an artist... all eyes were on me and I intended to have my aspirations as a painter taken seriously' (p.36). The story leads us, readers, through the author's 'fine' childhood to the point where we encounter her textual self as a determined, steadfast young woman, confident of her artistic self.

To sum up, framed in a decidedly constructive light, I have argued that the support Ringgold records in the first chapters of WFOTB paves the way for her artistic identification. Mothering and the 'extended family' – once a medium for Black captives to reclaim their humanity and create a *home* beyond home – enacts in Ringgold's writing a similar, though historically revised role. It gives Black women and men, including Ringgold, bearings, protection and connection to a broader community in a still highly discriminatory society. Insofar as Ringgold's life and future depend on that connection, the community as well as the domestic space they inhabit become intrinsic to the serious and committed 'painter' she presents herself to be in her autobiographical writing.

5.1.3 Gender roles to resist racism and achieve ‘something significant’

Just as the chapters that cover Ringgold’s childhood and education attribute such a productive role to her parents and their household, the next section of WFOTB addresses the making of her own family in equally constructive terms. I want to investigate how, here, Ringgold proceeds to reproduce in her household the domestic and familial relationships which, earlier in the memoir, enabled her to develop and affirm her identity as an artist.

This section of WFOTB begins by recounting how by 1952, Ringgold is married and has had two daughters. Although she is only twenty-two, she welcomes every ‘addition to [her]... family’ – the enthusiasm of the narrative unwavering even though she is still attending college and in her words: her ‘marriage [to Earl Wallace] was not a secure one’ (1995, p.49). Indeed, her husband’s drug habit and irregular comings and goings with fellow musicians lead Ringgold to periodically move out of their home, return to her mother’s household for support, and finally leave him for the sake of her daughters (p.54). However, these problems do not seem to compromise the author’s commitment to the ideal of family life. Ringgold temporarily gives up the ‘happy’ existence she had hoped for with Earl, but a few years later marries the man that her daughter portrays with such aversion in *Black Macho: Burdette Ringgold, or Birdie* (p.57). However, it is significant that as WFOTB begins to relate her affair with Birdie, Ringgold details the rationale that underpins her attachment to men. As if her relationship with Birdie called into question her integrity as a feminist – like Wallace had suggested – this passage reads almost as a justification of Ringgold’s way of life:

Despite the heavily defined male/female roles we were all playing, black men and black women had much in common and sought one another’s company... They needed us to confirm their identities, as we needed them in just the same way. The overbearing specter of racism, which hovered over all of us, made us more equal, more able to need one another. We were forced to be together because we were all that we had (1995, p.58).

In this quote, Ringgold extends the logic that underpins her portrayal of the 'extended family' to 'Black men.' Men support her in her endeavour to become an artist by helping her endure the widespread 'racism' that 'hovers over' them all. However, the first sentence acknowledges the potential sexism of gender 'roles.' As a preposition, 'despite' suggests that engaging in gendered behaviour is not systematically favourable. As I have stressed throughout this thesis, 'heavily defined' female and male 'roles' impose rules of behaviour that might limit what women and men can do or be. Nonetheless, by also using the term 'play' in the same sentence, Ringgold here suggests that assuming these 'roles' is a performative gesture. Furthermore, it is a performance that fulfils a broader purpose. Normative gender attitudes are functional in that they help Black women and men 'confirm their identities.' And while the way in which gendered roles might 'confirm their identities' remains vague – Ringgold does not give specific details – she nonetheless points to the fact that this function is connected with overcoming racism.

To unpack this quote further, it is worth recalling the historical and personal context in which Ringgold writes her memoir. As I outlined earlier, the 1970s were marked by an organised intellectual attack on the Black family. It was a period where, as Audre Lorde comments, 'the myth of the Black matriarchy as a social disease was being presented by racist forces to redirect our attention from the real sources of Black oppression' (1978c, p.45). Institutional 'forces' used stereotypes of invulnerable Black women and emasculated Black men to justify social disadvantage in the Black community – and Ringgold's own daughter, Michele Wallace herself had drawn on these stereotypes in her work. Furthermore, she had aligned them with her mother and stepfather when talking about her family. My intention in placing Ringgold's writing thus into context is to stress the difficulties she was responding to through WFOTB. Seen in its original framework, her commentary on gender relations in the Black community is more than a description. It becomes an eloquent personal defence against racial stereotyping. The narrative defends Ringgold from the accusation that she is an inadequate feminist and mother by explaining the use and importance of relationships between Black women and men.

While the previous chapters of WFOTB illustrate how familial love helps Ringgold assert her persona, this passage presents the intrinsic workings of a relationship that is core to her understanding of family. I have detailed how Ringgold ponders on the details of ‘male/female’ interactions to *demonstrate* how the benefits of working together outweigh the disadvantages. At the same time, I want to suggest that her words indirectly address how Wallace had misread her relationship with Birdie: if Ringgold and Birdie take up the roles of woman and man ‘to confirm their identities,’ if they perform because they ‘need one another,’ then, they cannot be dismissed simply as stereotypes. Birdie is not an emasculated man asserting his authority to overcompensate for his weakness; Ringgold is not a matriarch who controls the relationship – nor is she a strong woman who secretly covets to be ‘dominated’ – as Wallace suggests elsewhere when talking about Black women in the sixties (2015, p.92). On the contrary, Ringgold and Birdie are two people who consciously embody normative gender behaviours as a means to simultaneously endure and challenge racist beliefs that openly pathologise them. Following that line of thought, I want to propose that the purpose of the gender performance Ringgold alludes to is therefore both to produce an image of normality and to enable Black women and men to materially come together in order to support each other. For Ringgold here, performing ‘heavily defined male/female roles,’ seems to erode negative stereotyping of Black families because it *shows* that they are not dysfunctional. In itself this is a deeply problematic idea that appears to play up to the heteronormative status quo. It might seem that she is saying conforming to norms is a preferable way to live. But Ringgold is not making that suggestion. Rather, I would contend that, framed against racist stereotyping, her words express how adhering to norms sometimes makes it easier to navigate society. In that sense, Ringgold’s arguments on mutual dependence convey that ‘playing’ gender ‘roles’ enables Black women and men to fend off socially and psychically undermining racist rhetoric because, through these ‘roles,’ they *appear* just as *anyone and everyone else*. On the other hand, and on a more practical level, the very real racism Black women and men face makes them seek ‘one another’s company.’ It forces them ‘together’ because they share a common struggle.

In an equally affirming tone, Ringgold is adamant to show in the following pages how Birdie was instrumental in her artistic making. She refers to him as one of her ‘closest companions’ (1995, p.56). He is her ‘confidant,’ a person she can trust because from the time she meets him, he appears to her as ‘a man looking for his complement in a mate, not someone to hide behind him’ – which fits Ringgold’s self-representation as a resolute and independent woman and artist (p.57). Hence, in the same paragraph that Ringgold announces she ‘would marry’ him, she also concludes: ‘Birdie’s help with my children and my career as an artist had been motivated by his feeling that I was doing something significant, something unreachable in his own life’ (p.57). The account conveys how the couple comes together in ways that are beneficial to Ringgold. Birdie helps her achieve ‘something significant’ – this is work towards her creative making – by helping her with her children. Everyday care work becomes equivalent to professional support because, without help in the domestic space, Ringgold might not have had the time, energy, or means, to become an artist. Therefore, the domestic she reproduces by grounding herself in family life is presented as both shelter and resource for her creative career. It is true that her reference to her partner’s feelings is speculative, in the sense that understanding other people’s feelings always is. However, her interpretation of Birdie’s motivations – Ringgold is doing something ‘unreachable’ for most Black women and men – substantiates and concords with the gender dynamics she has described. While personal problems between Black women and men exist, circumstances motivate, if not require them, to pull ‘together.’

Ringgold’s description of mutual reliance thus highlights the crucial impact that racial politics has had in shaping the private life of the author’s persona: what might seem like a promising option in the writing of numerous white women artists – greater independence from the family – could increase difficulties for creative women of colour by leaving them isolated when they need most support. Critical race feminists argued during the women’s liberation movement in the seventies and eighties that abandoning the nuclear family was unlikely to grant Black women the kind of autonomy portrayed as crucial for professional success in liberal feminist circles. In her now classic critique of the movement, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks writes how due to the racist reality unfolding outside the walls of the

family home: 'many black women find the family the least oppressive institution' (1984/2000, p.38). Because, whereas autonomy might grant access to greater creative freedom for women in a position of relative privilege, 'family ties are the only sustained support system for oppressed peoples' (p.38). hooks stresses how the notion of 'men as the enemy' was alienating to women who conceived men as an intrinsic part of their community (p.27). WFOTB recounts how Ringgold experiences numerous racist encounters in the public sphere as she tries to obtain a job or gain recognition. In contrast to those moments and in agreement with hooks' arguments, domestic family life and her everyday with Birdie shine as a space of respite. One of hooks' central aims in *Feminist Theory* had been to challenge feminist analyses that saw the 'abolition of family' as an absolute requirement for feminist liberation (2000, p.38)⁴⁶. Against the dogmatism of this type of feminism, hooks compellingly argued that: 'individuals from privileged classes rely on a number of institutional and social structures to affirm their interests' (p.39). Like the women hooks draws on in her examples, Ringgold does not benefit from institutional or structural support. She is in a position of disadvantage. Thus, her reliance on the family is necessary according to the reality she experiences and stages through the narrative. As a result, I would argue that her memoir conveys how the presence of the family and her husband around her cannot compromise her feminism because they form part of her existence and survival.

Amidst the hostility that surrounds them, Black and poor women often cannot afford or have no interest in giving up their family network. Ringgold's story upholds this reality by exemplifying how, within the world she develops, the family in its different permutations – extended network, mother and daughter figurations, and the couple – give her the encouragement she lacks elsewhere. By emphasising this image throughout WFOTB, Ringgold presents herself through interpersonal dynamics that

⁴⁶ This debate mirrors that which emerged in the UK after the publication of Michèle Barret's & Mary McIntosh's *The Anti-Social Family* (1982/2014). Arguing that division of labour made the family an inherently oppressive institution, Barret & McIntosh disregarded how by privileging sexism over racism, they had failed to reflect on how women of colour's experiences of the family differed from theirs. In response to their unsatisfactory attempt to address their racial biases in 'Ethnocentrism and Socialist-Feminist Theory' (1985), Black Feminists such as Heidi Mirza (1986) and Hamida Kazi (1986) among others, criticised the authors' silencing and ignorance of Black women's concerns.

bind her to a larger community. Her story does not reproduce tropes of autonomous creative subjectivity because her social situation makes her both depended on and responsible for others. Hence, as a narrator, Ringgold integrates these other people in her life as a constitutive part of her artistic making – and it is this connection that she attempts to share with her daughters through her mothering so that they can, like her, pursue the life they wish in spite of institutional difficulties.

5.2 Room for discussion: a dialogue in time

I have argued that when Michele Wallace wrote *Black Macho* and challenged Ringgold's self-image as an artist by compromising her role as a mother figure, Ringgold used autobiographical writing to reassert her persona and legitimise her perspective. However, the dialogue did not end with *A Letter To My Daughter* or with the first few chapters of *WFOTB*. Michele Wallace continued writing about her mother in blogs and essays, where she combined autobiographical insight and anecdotes with academic scholarship⁴⁷. In the second half of this chapter, I analyse how, unfolding throughout the years, this intergenerational dialogue sheds further light on what might have moved Ringgold in her writing of *WFOTB* as well as the stakes involved in establishing her self-portrayal as final.

One of Wallace's subsequent essays where she refers to her mother is 'Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity' (1990/2016)⁴⁸. Ringgold was not the only person who had felt misrepresented by Wallace's writing. Alice Walker

⁴⁷ A number of these essays were gathered in *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (2016), which specifically includes a section on Michele Wallace's autobiographical writing. In addition, Wallace is a prolific blogger. She discusses her family history in the following blogs: <http://40sand50s.blogspot.co.uk/>; <http://blackandbluespeople.blogspot.co.uk/>; <http://blackmachorevisited.blogspot.co.uk/>; <http://mjsoulpictures.blogspot.co.uk/>; <http://ringgoldinthe30s.blogspot.co.uk/>; and <http://ringgoldinthe1960s.blogspot.co.uk/>. Furthermore, for a number of years, Wallace has been teaching autobiographical writing at the City College of New York.

⁴⁸ First published in *Heresies* in 1989 and expanded in the collection *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (2016).

comments, stressing Wallace's 'self-contempt and contempt for others,' that *Black Macho* had a lot of detractors even among those who defended the author's right to express herself (1979b/2005, p.325). 'Variations on Negation' is significant here because, in this text, Wallace details further the reasons that lead her to develop her account of female/male stereotypes and relations in the Black community. Returning to *Black Macho*, she explains how when writing, she had been frustrated that women and men, white and Afro-American discourses, feminist and non-feminist critics, and her mother, all reproduced the myth of the superwoman by emphasising Black women's resilience (2005b, p.222). For Wallace, the reproduction of this myth was detrimental insofar as the *superwoman* had been and continued to be a 'weapon' that covered up 'an inexorable process of black female disenfranchisement, exploitation, oppression and despair' in both women's private and professional lives (p.227). To stress Black women's strength concealed the fact that they were being routinely abused and undervalued.

'Variations on Negation' explains that Wallace's aim in highlighting how the myth of the superwoman was being perpetuated had been to dispel it – even as she ended up reproducing it (2005b, p.227). Her intention had not been to suggest that Black women embodied the stereotype. She had meant to underline that the myth masked the opposite: they were vulnerable. Repositioned from that point of view, Wallace's critique of her mother's domestic arrangements cannot simply be seen as hostile. It appears to me that, at least to an extent, her perspective might have originated from a space of concern. In that light, I want to propose that Wallace's frustration with social hypocrisy regarding the predicament of Black women makes it relevant to consider her arguments further: are there any inconsistencies in Ringgold's portrayal of her family's supportive role in her artistic making? And if there are, what can these discrepancies tell us about Ringgold self-portrayal in WFOTB?

5.2.1 Complicating the domestic ideal

Earlier I began to illustrate how Wallace repeatedly condemns Birdie's behaviour in *Black Macho*. In another example, she relates with distaste how when growing up he taught her how to clean the house and told her not to be like her mother because: '

“She is a nice lady but she’s a bad wife” ’ (2015, p.90). Ringgold vehemently challenges this statement in *A Letter To My Daughter*, defending her husband and accusing Wallace of no less than ‘putting words in Birdie’s mouth’ (2015, p.68). On the other hand, there are episodes in *WFOTB* that seem more aligned with Wallace’s version of events. Among the numerous passages that depict Ringgold’s life with Birdie in constructive terms, a number of pages offer a more troubling account. The narrative relates how, at one point after they married, domestic responsibilities, gendered labour and sexist dynamics, began to interfere with Ringgold’s creative work:

For some time my life with Birdie became a burden. I tried to clear time for my painting, but it was impossible. The children’s clothes were constantly piling up, and before I could wash the dishes for one meal, it was time to start the next. The house was never quite clean and Birdie objected to having someone come in and help me (1995, p.61).

In this moment of intense domestic frustration, little separates Ringgold’s text from the other autobiographical writings I have analysed in this thesis. The family home is reframed as a ‘house,’ a shift that serves to underscore the physical work involved in keeping a material space in pleasant living conditions – that is, pleasant for everyone but Ringgold, as this intimate world is organised around the comfort of others and not hers. The quote summons an idealised domestic image that, in fact, fails to materialise, but pushes her away from her art nonetheless: dirt, dishes and clothes constantly ‘piling up,’ fill her days and lock her into a pattern where, moving from one task to the next, there is simply no time or space for creativity. In this manner, the house is figured as a constant stream of gendered expectations that draw Ringgold into a classic housewife role. Sustaining this image of *bliss* thus promptly becomes a ‘burden.’ And the most disquieting aspect within this situation is Birdie’s attitude as the passage describes how, in a disturbing turn of events, he cuts her off from the community she could seek to ‘help’ her out. Birdie objects to let others assist her with what he wants to be her domestic role.

This portrait of Birdie as an imperious husband looking to regulate Ringgold's movements throughout the day contrasts with the 'confidant' and equal partner we find when she first speaks of their relationship. Birdie becomes increasingly obnoxious and misogynous as Ringgold continues the story and recounts how he tried to isolate her 'by building a wall between himself and... [her] mother' because '[h]e was determined to be the man in his home' (1995, p.62). As if Willi Posey's 'help' to her daughter would endanger his masculinity, the narrative tells how Birdie rebukes 'her at every turn,' leaving Ringgold alone, stuck in the house and unable to spend time with her art (p.62). Consequently, the walls of the house shift in their meaning. The barrier that once shielded Ringgold from the world now seals her in, as Birdie figuratively locks the door behind him by preventing her mother from helping her. These conditions make Ringgold feel 'trapped,' creating a progressively contradictory picture of her spouse as she states: 'The worst thing about our marriage was that Birdie never took responsibility for being a companion during waking hours' (p.62). Directly contradicting her earlier words and with the same term she uses before, 'companion,' this sentence temporarily represents Birdie as an antagonist. His actions actively work against her artistic self because they literally stop her painting.

The tone of this passage is not common throughout WFOTB. However, the feeling and events it relates are consequential as they complicate the broader narrative of the memoir. Ringgold's account of her domestic life in these pages become ever more troubling as she moves through outlandish scenes which ultimately develop into a confrontation. Ringgold recounts how, following a 'disagreement about his right to go out and... [hers] to stay home,' Birdie attacks her (1995, p.64). She writes how, after he pins her down in a brutal outburst:

I wrestled him to the floor and he continued to yell and knock me off my feet each time I stood up... [he] hurled me around the room in an alarming way. I wanted him to stop but he continued to yell and run into me and hold me in a bear hug (1995, p.64)

The violent clash between Ringgold and Birdie eventually ends with her calling the police to arrest him but refusing to press charges as she feels he has learned his lesson by spending the night in jail. However, despite Ringgold's insistence that the assault was an isolated incident, this scene deeply challenges her account of the family household as a supportive environment. Domestic violence – yelling, hitting, hurling, wrestling – all the terms that the narrative uses to describe the scene make it hard to picture a more deterring context to become an artist, or to become anything else a woman wants to be for that matter. This passage suggests that if Ringgold did achieve 'equal' partnership with Birdie, it was not a given.

Insofar as these scenes are fragments of a much longer narrative, I cannot say that they unquestionably validate Wallace's perspective. However, the brutality and sexism they illustrate complicates Ringgold's picture of family life as a simple source of support in her becoming an artist. Passages such as these lead Lisa Farrington to argue that having a family interfered with the development of Ringgold's career (1999, p.37). Taking my analysis in a different direction, I would argue instead that these contradictions show how while intergenerational connection, mothering, and community support are essential to Ringgold's self-portrayal as an artist, the idealised notion of family on which these notions are grounded is a fantasy; it is an image the narrative is invested in. The problem, as Wallace sees it in 'Variations on Negation' (2016), derives from building on a model of community from the past *only* on the basis of shared racial experience. Connecting her mother's attitude with similar patterns in Black women's writing, Wallace articulates that this mode of thinking – epitomised by Alice Walker's 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens' (1977/2005) – is 'infected' with 'nostalgia' for a romanticised ideal that does not respond to Black women's present reality (2016, p.225). Wallace argues that suggesting Black experience links past and contemporary generations, blood relatives, and chosen kin, is a dangerous romantic fantasy. As the example of WFOTB illustrates, and as Wallace argued in *Black Macho*, Black women are at times subject to oppression in the family. As a result, to insist on the value of Black women's connection to their communities regardless of what takes place in those communities, reproduces what has been called *the family romance* – an idealised notion that, in connection with the myth of the superwoman, covers up the ongoing silencing and exploitation of Black women in

the domestic sphere. For that reason, it is troubling to Wallace that her mother, ‘a prominent artist, well educated and active in the Women’s movement... pursue[s] Walker’s proposal’ (2016, p.226) and perpetuates the romance.

However, while Wallace’s critique is to an extent sensible, it overlooks the constructive role the family romance performs in Ringgold’s life story. Before, I outlined how narratively, the social position Ringgold occupies makes her attachment to her family and partners intelligible and even necessary. In the next section, I will explore how the fantasy of the family romance works as a counterpart to this practical attachment.

5.2.2 Belonging in the ‘African family romance’

If, as Ringgold’s memoir articulates, community gives the artist a material means of survival and endurance, the family as an idealised image grounds her textual self in history. As I touched on in the introduction, the ideal of family gives the persona Ringgold crafts in WFOTB a literary strategy of belonging by attributing her a place in society. Wallace is markedly negative in her approach to the family romance. But whilst agreeing with her on the fact that it is a fantasy, Saidiya Hartman, on the other hand, provides a more nuanced account of the romance in her book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (2007). Hartman’s analysis of the family romance is helpful for me to interpret WFOTB’s enduring investment in family support as it details how stories can help us exist.

Lose Your Mother occupies a tentative space between memoir and creative nonfiction. The book documents Hartman’s personal journey into Ghana. The aim of her voyage, she tells us, is to trace back the Atlantic Slave Route for research purposes. However, Hartman admits that she is also moved forward by a desire ‘to belong somewhere or, at least... [to find an explanation of why she feels] like a stranger’ in America after her family has been established there for generations (2007, p.8). But in the course of the narrative, Hartman realises that ‘the past is not a country to which’ she can return, for there is no common narrative or identity that would unite her with the people of Ghana (p.15). Whereas in the United States the

history of slavery connects people along the axis of race, she explains how in Ghana slavery is instead a matter of kinship (p.73). Therefore, as a descendant of slaves, both the people and the place Hartman encounters resist her longing for affiliation. Thus, she describes further that there is no 'bedrock of shared sentiment' between her and the locals because they have a different interpretation of history (p.171). Most of the Ghanaians she crosses paths with do not recognise her as kin, like she had in a sense hoped. For them, kin is not equivalent to blackness. This realisation highlights for Hartman that, as Wallace also argues, the promise of home and return to a family long left behind is a fantasy. However, while Hartman comes to accept the impossibility of connection, this fact does not dissipate her desire for belonging. Furthermore, she reasons that, while it is a fantasy, the family romance gave slaves and their descendants: 'an imagined place [that] might afford you a vision of freedom... an alternative to your defeat... [a story to] save your life' (p.97). In other words, the narrative of home, return, and community the romance sustains, has historically allowed numerous African-Americans to develop a sense of belonging *somewhere* when feeling like strangers in the world they occupy. While Hartman herself cannot occupy this position, she recognises it in others. Through this lens, *Lose Your Mother* shows that the value of the family romance resides in its power to offer hope to those who are or have been dispossessed, abused or discriminated against.

Ringgold grew up in a society shaped by such recurrent racism. I have outlined how she had had to regularly confront people's bigotry and condescension when navigating the art world. I would argue that these encounters can potentially be seen as an influence on her attachment to the mythical ideal of family in WFOTB. Ringgold's attachment to the myth of *return* becomes particularly apparent when in the later part of the text, she describes how she began writing her memoir shortly after returning from her first trip to West Africa in 1976⁴⁹ (1995, p.212). Because, unlike Hartman, Ringgold recounts that 'as a black woman in Africa,' she had 'never been so completely accepted... [as she felt in] Nigeria and Ghana' (p.209). Ringgold

⁴⁹ Ringgold's trip to West Africa in 1976 was sponsored by a travel award from the American Association of University Professors.

would not have written this statement if she had not struggled in the social context she occupied. I suggest that it is indeed because she had known discrimination, that Ringgold positioned her written self here within a generation of Black Americans that in Harman's terms, still envisioned Africa: 'as a future in which... the race would be redeemed' (2007, p.34). Through her description of West African hospitality, Ringgold locates herself in a generation still invested in the romance. Furthermore, at the time Ringgold was coming out as an artist in the fifties and sixties, Africa was being re-imagined by public intellectuals as a place of belonging for *all* Black people. As Hartman details, politicians and celebrities endorsed the belief that in Africa, Black women and men could leave behind 'what they called euphemistically, second-class citizenship' (p.34). In that spirit, and in contrast with her difficult life in New York, Africa is in Ringgold's literary world a place of acceptance. Moreover, Ringgold was also deeply involved in the Black Arts Movement, which, echoing the romance, similarly promoted a return to African roots. Her memoir thus underscores how African rhythms, patterns, and stories inspired her creative work – as they had also inspired her mother Willi Posey in her fashion design before her (1995, p.74)⁵⁰. In this textual and social context, Ringgold's feelings of *complete acceptance* suggest that the period's prevalent hope and belief in a better past and future for all Black people – promoted through Pan-Africanism – strengthened her attachment to the African family romance.

From that perspective, it is consistent that when Ringgold returned to the US and began her autobiographical writing, she employed the rhetoric of African origins to respond to Wallace's criticism in *A Letter To My Daughter*. For instance, Ringgold draws on the African family romance in her description of the African-American man's potential for devotion to his community. In contrast with Wallace's image of the resentful *black macho*, Ringgold proposes an alternative caring male figure. Addressing her daughter, she contends that, if the African-American man were given space 'to love himself and his people, you will see him at is best – a natural man like

⁵⁰ These influences are accordingly present in: the 'Black Light Series' (1995, p.162); the 'Slave Rape' series and 'tankas' (197); the 'Witch Mask Series (p.199); the 'story quilts' (p.76); and especially, the 'African Mask Series' (p.212).

the black man I saw in Africa' (2015, p.20). It seems almost redundant to say that this 'natural man' Ringgold encounters 'in Africa' is a fantasy derived from idealised family narratives. At the same time, the image is a powerful symbolic prop in that it personifies her hope for a better world. Ringgold idealises this 'natural man' because he inhabits a society where he is part of the majority, and thus, he surely feels fulfilled. Her own feelings of acceptance in the writing function as rhetorical evidence to sustain her argument. It is as if she were saying to Wallace: I know because I have been there. Personal conviction enables Ringgold to present the African-American man as an adulterated version of a true and better self. In contrast to the 'natural [Black] man,' the Black man in America has been driven off track by a racist society. He is less satisfied and less caring because he has not been given the opportunity to develop 'his body and his mind' – or in other words, his potential (p.20). Her logic suggests: were the African-American man to feel 'completely accepted' as Ringgold herself felt in 'Ghana and Nigeria,' he would thrive and love 'his people.'

Portrayed in this light, the Black man's *faults* or mistakes – mistakes maybe such as the ones Birdie committed in the passages I analysed in this section – are subsumed, and to an extent excused, by a social explanation. To an extent, Ringgold seems to say that, when the African-American man fails to support 'his people,' he cannot be held solely accountable because he has not been given 'space' and a 'chance' to 'be whatever he can be' (2015, p.20). On the one hand, Ringgold shows how social circumstances influence behaviour. But it is easy to understand why her romanticisation of African family disturbed her daughter. It can be argued that the family romance led Ringgold to underplay what Wallace refers to as Birdie's 'erratic' behaviour (2015, p.xxxvii). The romance makes her accept, even if only for a short period of time, seemingly intolerable living conditions. However, I would argue that overall, Ringgold's use of the romance in her autobiographical writing helps her ground and share a sense of home and belonging essential to her artistic identity that cannot be underestimated. As a Black woman moving through a racist society, like the African-American man she uses as an example, Ringgold was not automatically given a 'space' or a 'chance' to thrive either. Ringgold had to fight for her right to study art, to be represented, and to be acknowledged. Therefore, for the sake of her image and future as an artist, sustaining the romance might have weighed heavily on

her scale of priorities. Without the romance, it may have been impossible for her to succeed. It may have been impossible to endure being turned down by galleries and it might have even been impossible to surmount her feelings of being 'trapped' in the house. Therefore, when reading WFOTB it appears to me that, ultimately, the memoir's emphasis on family support and care, despite all Ringgold's domestic difficulties, indicates that her survival and artistic self-making are reliant on her reproducing the fantasy.

Certainly, Ringgold's portrayal of her sustaining family environment and Birdie is at times contradictory in WFOTB. But what the broader narrative seems to illustrate is that these discrepancies are unavoidable. They are an intrinsic part of living in a society where both racism and sexism are everyday occurrences. Despite these complexities though, Ringgold's autobiographical writing conveys how there is more that brings her together with Birdie than pulls them apart. His actions sometimes disrupt her image of the family home as a source of support for her artistic identity. However, she generally presents him as a reliable 'companion' in her creative journey because he helps her face broader challenges (1995, p.57). Through that logic, the African family romance imbues the narrative and works as symbol that gives her an imaginative space of belonging. The romance is what makes the family household *home*, and thus also contributes to her resilience and endurance.

5.2.3 Writing for change: expanding mothering

Audre Lorde argues in her well-known essay 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' that speaking out is an act of self-revelation that makes you vulnerable but also gives you your 'greatest strength' (1978/2007, p.42). Self-revelation is frightening in that it exposes you to others; at the same time, Lorde explains, visibility is an essential step for transformation. Speaking herself as a Black lesbian woman, Lorde stresses that, only by making their experience visible can Black women fight the racism and depersonalisation that so distorts their image (2007, p.43). For that reason, for Lorde, speaking out is a responsibility we all ought to take

up so that we can survive⁵¹. We need to assume the duty to voice the reality of our own lives in order to teach others about it and continue to exist, for as difficult as visibility might be, remaining silent makes you vulnerable to discrimination, misrepresentation, and violence. Conversely, to speak out, she concludes, is to take ‘part in a process of life that is creative and continuing, that is growth’ (p.43). What this means is that language as self-definition is a radical act of self-preservation and development oriented towards the future. It gives us further existence and control over our lives.

When Faith Ringgold composed her memoir, she took part in such a process of transformation for herself and her community. Ringgold writes at the end of *WFOTB*: ‘I don’t want the story of my life to be about racism’ (1995, p.270). I see this declaration as a gesture Ringgold performs so that she can avoid being defined by discrimination, precisely because much of her story revolves around it. However, the phrase also suggests that Ringgold’s aim – in her words, what she wants to accomplish in sharing her narrative – is to show that struggle can be overcome. Ringgold turns herself into a model of success by describing her story also as a story about ‘attainment, love of family, art, helping others, courage, values, [and] dreams coming true’ (p.270). Her conclusion therefore carries an overwhelmingly positive message of change that aims to be inspirational. It acknowledges existing difficulties but contends that things do not need to be as they are. In this light, this statement and its precise terminology evoke Audre Lorde’s arguments and leads me to interpret Ringgold’s writing as a form of teaching: a lesson about what life is like for a Black woman artist, but also about what life *can be*, more than rejection and stereotyping. Ringgold’s message suggests that she too associates writing with change as writing is the instrument through which she portrays the complexities of her existence, as well as the possibility of a different world. Therefore, insofar as making visible one’s personal story is a strategy to enable ‘growth,’ I want to conclude this chapter by suggesting that Ringgold’s writing can also be understood as an act of mothering

⁵¹ In her effort to build alliances across differences, Lorde often uses first person plural in her writing when offering guidance for social transformation. I follow her model by using *we* and *us* when I want to emphasise her message.

through which the author seeks to pass onto her *community* what she has learned. She attempts to share more broadly the lessons she had tried to pass on to Wallace. By representing the reality of her life through her memoir and, as I will discuss below, her children's books, Ringgold positions herself in a hypothetical future that foregrounds transformation. She enables other lives to go on by sharing her life.

The first addressees of Ringgold's writing are – I have argued – her daughters, especially, Michele Wallace. On a straightforward level, Ringgold's memoir answers Wallace's criticism by articulating an alternative image of the artist. However, on a deeper level, this process of self-representation aspires to educate her daughters, and later others, so that like Ringgold they can be what they desire to be. Indeed, WFOTB details that Ringgold's aim when getting involved in the feminist movement and introducing her daughters to cultural institutions, events, and objects, had been to provide them with 'choices' (1995, p.133). For Ringgold knew that, as Lorde again details in her poem 'A Litany for Survival,' 'choice' is an 'indulgence' not given to everyone, particularly not to those who because of their race or other position, were 'never meant to survive' (1978/2017, p.200). With this reality as a background, Ringgold aspires to give her daughters 'choices' by educating them. And insofar as her writing makes her visible as a model, I have suggested that her autobiographical texts are part of this process. However, given that WFOTB is a published manuscript and so are her children's books, this act of mothering is not confined to her daughters. Ringgold's writings *extend* her guidance and her written self-portrait beyond the physical boundaries of her household. Through her books, she travels into other houses; she reaches other people, and most importantly for her, other children.

Cinema and media studies scholar Kara Keeling highlights how children's books 'offered Ringgold a much wider audience' than she had enjoyed before because they 'were not artifact-based and could be mass produced' (1999, p.15). Their potential to connect numerous readers with African-American experience and history has received particular scholarly attention, especially in the fields of English, African-American Literature and Educational studies (Jenkins, 2016; Keeling, 1999; Millman, 2005; Priest, 2014). Indeed, I would add that the broad availability of these texts

makes both Ringgold and her protagonists, models available for anyone, thus enabling all those who might listen to her words to have more ‘choices.’ Myisha Priest suggests specifically that some of Ringgold’s books enable us to reimagine the culturally prevalent image of the Black girl’s wounded body – her existence as a site of violence – as a space of self-creation (2014, p.464). She contends that protagonists in texts such as *Tar Beach* (1991)⁵² or *The Invisible Princess* (1999) rewrite the story of Black girls by articulating subjectivities that resist and exceed victimisation. Nonetheless, while girls certainly occupy a place of honour in the picture books, Ringgold explains in the final chapter of WFOTB that the aim of her stories is to encourage *all* children, and especially Black children, to pursue their dreams:

These children’s books seek to explain to children some of the hard facts of slavery and racial prejudice, issues that are difficult but crucial for their education. But my books are even more about children having dreams, and instilling in them the belief that they can change things. When Cassie [the protagonist of *Tar Beach* – Ringgold’s first published book for children] believes she can fly, it is not because she wants to go to Florida to her grandma, but because she envisions a better life for her family. Already at eight she wisely recognizes that all good things start with a dream (1995, p.261).

Between 1991 and 2016 Ringgold wrote and published thirteen children’s books and illustrated a further two. Ringgold’s own books take on subjects such as the Civil Rights Movement, icons of Black liberation in the United States, the Harlem

⁵² Before it became a book, *Tar Beach* was one of Ringgold’s story quilts. Story quilts are Ringgold’s most characteristic technique. In these pieces Ringgold combines the southern African-American traditions of quilt making and folktale with fine art by painting and writing directly onto the fabric. The story quilt *Tar Beach* (from the *Woman on a Bridge* series) is part of the Guggenheim Museum collection in New York. In addition, it is significant as Myisha Priest argues that, historically, slaves ‘literally used [quilts] to inscribe paths of escape’ (2014, p.464). Farrington also highlights that, forbidden from reading and writing, slave women learned to communicate encoding messages in the designs of their quilts (1999, p.97).

Renaissance, slavery, migration, and racial inequality⁵³. As Ringgold indicates, these texts are all extraordinarily didactic books that seek to teach children about African-American history without shying away from the realities of ‘racial prejudice.’ Nonetheless, *Tar Beach* (1991) remains her most popular, and I would argue, one of her most uplifting ones⁵⁴. In contrast to her more historical books, *Tar Beach* recounts the story of a little girl whose dreams of helping her family overcome racism and discrimination come into being. *Tar Beach* tells the story of Cassie, an eight-year-old girl who, on warm summer nights, lies on the roof of her building, dreaming of a better job for her father and for her mother to stop constantly worrying about him. Through her reverie, Cassie takes flight and claims for her family those buildings and places they have been excluded from. A number of scholars, such as Priest, associate the motif of flight in Ringgold’s stories with slave narratives that employ flight as a metaphor or symbolic return to Africa and freedom (2014, p.470). According to Jenkins, however, Ringgold proposes flight instead as a ‘coping mechanism’ to work within the confines of one’s social situation (2016, p.344). Cassie flies above ground to look at her neighbourhood from a distance, and the space between the young girl and the world she observes below helps her develop a critical perspective essential for change. As Jenkins states: ‘At no point does Cassie imagine a flight that will either take her family away from their immediate circumstances’ (p.256). Circumscribed by her social ‘circumstances,’ her wishes are all the more significant for they are within reach. Similarly, I interpret Cassie’s flight as a story about self-determination and faith in oneself that, in fact, parallels Ringgold’s trajectory. The child’s nights on the tar-covered roof of the building evoke the author’s own childhood. Like her, or perhaps

⁵³ Faith Ringgold’s book for children include: *Tar Beach* (1991); *Aunt Harriet’s Underground Railroad in the Sky* (1992); *Dinner at Aunt Connie’s House* (1993); *My dream of Martin Luther King* (1995); *Bonjour Lonnie* (1996); *The Invisible Princess* (1999); *If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks* (1999); *Cassie’s Colorful Day* (1999); *Counting to Tar Beach* (1999); *Cassie’s Word Quilt* (2002); *Henry Ossawa Tanner: His Boyhood Dream Comes True* (2011); *Harlem Renaissance Party* (2015); and *We Came to America* (2016). In addition, she has illustrated *The Three Witches* (2006) by Zora Neale Hurston and *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (2015) by Gwendolyn Brooks.

⁵⁴ Ringgold’s first book for children *Tar Beach* had an extraordinary success. In 1991, it won the Parent’s Choice Gold Award and The New York Times Book award for Best Illustrated Children’s Books. It was a runner up for the Caldecott Medal and winner of the Coretta Schott King Award in 1992. And in 1993 it received the Ezra Jack Keats Book Award.

even as her young alter ego, Cassie comes face to face with racism but refuses to back down. Her belief that 'she can fly' (1995, p.259) takes her beyond her mother's tears and her father's disillusion. Cassie imagines another world, and because she does, she can make that world real. Echoing Lorde's arguments, Cassie's story thus initiates a process of transformation as her narrative encourages and enacts the possibility of 'change' and 'growth.'

It is true that on the surface Cassie's story makes change appear simple. After all, she takes up flight with nothing to stop her. However, imagining a *better* life is far from easy. To imagine something that does not currently exist requires exceptional commitment and self-confidence. It demands that we be creative, that we envisage what 'change' might look like even when it seems unlikely. To believe in one's 'dream' is a difficult achievement. But as the memoir articulates, that is indeed the explicit objective of Ringgold's writing: 'instilling in... [children] the belief that they can change things' (1995, p.261). With that purpose, *Tar Beach* makes Cassie into a model for children to follow, to recognise themselves in, and to dare to imagine. A similar argument applies to Ringgold's other children's books. The more historical narratives, like *Dinner at Aunt Connie's House* (1993) or *My Dream of Martin Luther King* (1995), might not provide such a direct possibility of identification. But even when children are not at the center of the story, they are still present as witnesses. As these children *watch*, Ringgold turns characters such as Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes and so many others into accessible models by representing them as crucial agents of history and the African-American community.

Ringgold's consistent portrayal of narratives of success leads me to believe that the passage where she describes her motivation for writing children's books shows what she hopes to achieve through her storytelling. In the same way that *WFOTB* makes Ringgold into a model, these stories embody the possibility to choose and pursue lives other than those we have been given. All of Ringgold's writings are thus invested in a 'better' future. Ringgold struggled to become an artist. As I stressed earlier, when she was a child, there were few models for her to follow and a lot of practical obstacles (1995, p.20). Against these difficulties, language becomes a means to illustrate and share the realities of discrimination with younger generations while

also showing them that they can be fought. That is how, I suggest, Ringgold's writing is transformative. Its 'greatest strength' lies in addressing young people that, in a projected future, will look back onto WFOTB and find an excellent Black woman artist. The writing's 'strength' lies in addressing children that would look back at her picture books and discover remarkable activists, writers, poets, and more. Ringgold creates herself as well as these historical figures as textual subjects so that when new generations search for models, they will be able to find them, and consequently, acquire greater freedom to imagine themselves.

To conclude and return to the beginning, I would ultimately also argue that the act of writing and publishing her life restores Ringgold's self-portrait as a good mother figure and feminist – the image that Wallace brought into question through *Black Macho*. Ringgold is not a good mother and feminist because she represents herself as such or because she cares for her daughters in the memoir. Ringgold re-establishes this image because, through her writing, she engages in mothering. I understand her writing as a form of mothering in the sense that the texts she crafts aid sustain and develop other lives. Ringgold helps other people, children and adults, grow and realise themselves by granting visibility to an experience that might resonate with theirs. Because, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs argues building on Audre Lorde's work, to engage in mothering is to perform the 'intergenerational care work of making a hostile world an affirming place for another person,' whether the person doing the labour identifies as a mother or not (2016, p.116). Gumbs is careful to nuance that mothering is not the same as motherhood (p.115). Many people who are not mothers perform mothering. At the same time, numerous mothers conceive mothering as their responsibility. That is the case of Ringgold in WFOTB. As I illustrated at the start, the figure of 'mother' organises Ringgold's textual self (1995, p.94). It is a defining role that becomes compromised when Wallace challenges Ringgold's constructive influence on her life. However, through her writing, Ringgold takes this intergenerational labour of care beyond the boundaries of the nuclear family and into her community. She makes herself present in households other than her own. And as her writing touches others, giving them a space of belonging to *home* their desires, it reasserts her mothering skills, her influence, and the value of her labour to enable

'growth.' Her writing reaffirms the significance of family, connection, and reinstates her self-image as a good mother and feminist.

Conclusion

In her essay 'One Child of One's Own: A Meaningful Digression within the Work(s),' Alice Walker explains how she had been concerned that motherhood would be a drawback to her creative career (1979a, p.362). Instead, with the birth of her daughter Rebecca, Walker conveys that she felt affirmed in a world where even self-proclaimed feminists – feminists adhering to white feminism that is – failed to recognise her existence as a writer. Her relationship with Rebecca sustained Walker because as she explains: 'We are together, my child and I. Mother and child, yes, but sisters really, against whatever denies us all that we are' (p.382). Unlike in her professional life, Walker did not need to prove herself to her daughter, for Rebecca already accepted her for who she was. In calling her daughter 'sister,' Walker disrupted the hierarchy that would place Rebecca in a relationship of dependence to her. Walker and her daughter are 'sisters' because as Black women they are equals above anything else. Joined together in their struggle against sexism and racism, they recognise each other.

Walker's reflections on mothering illustrate how she shares with her daughter a reality where Black women, in some instances with Black men, build connections among themselves as a means of survival. This type of connection between women has been a driving theme in Ringgold's personal trajectory and stories. Ringgold's writing adheres to a romanticised ideal of extended family that places her in direct relationship with past and future generations. She follows, as Wallace had worriedly pointed out, the Black feminist critical path Walker proposes in 'In Search of Our Mother's Gardens' (2005)⁵⁵. A key aim in this chapter has been to show that, when

⁵⁵ Kara Keeling puts it in these terms: 'like Walker, Ringgold self-consciously... positioned herself in a continuous tradition of African-American women artists and... used her art to give voice to the women of the past' (1999, p.14).

Michele Wallace challenged this model of connection in *Black Macho*, she jeopardised the persona Ringgold portrayed herself through, and thus, unintentionally encouraged the artist to articulate and circulate her ‘side of the story’ in the form of a memoir. In light of the conflict between mother and daughter, I have argued that Ringgold’s writing can be read as a means to express and assert the value of intergenerational connection, community, and the family household. Additionally, I have also shown how her writing enacts a strategic role in re-establishing Ringgold’s self-image as a good mother figure, feminist, and activist.

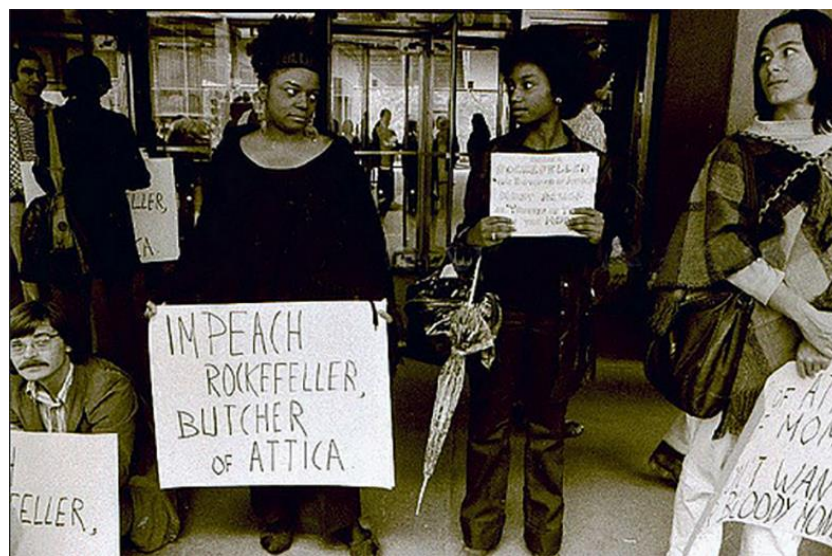


Figure 4: Faith Ringgold and Michele Wallace, Art Workers Coalition (AWC) protest, Museum of Modern Art, NYC, by Jan van Raay, 23 Sept. 1971.

Michele Wallace was and is as critical and as committed as an activist as Ringgold. The difference between her perspective and that of her mother’s is a question of differing paths and strategies. But their agenda remains close. Among the many pictures of Ringgold and Wallace publicly available, there is an image of mother and daughter taking part in a demonstration from the Art Workers Coalition (AWC) against Governor Nelson Rockefeller after the Attica Prison Uprising in 1971. I want to conclude this chapter with this image to reflect on the generational conflict that suffuses Ringgold’s autobiographical writing. Through my reading, I might even propose that this image functions as a visual analogy of their relationship. In the photograph, Ringgold and Wallace stand shoulder to shoulder, joined in their discontent against a political system that holds little to no regard for the life of

disenfranchised convicts, many of whom are Black men, disproportionately imprisoned for minor crimes. Mother and daughter face the camera demanding justice⁵⁶. In many ways they are united, they are together. In Alice Walker's words, they are sisters too. They draw strength from one another's outrage. However, I would add that, despite their shared objective and conviction, the looks they exchange might tell a more complex story. A grimace caught on camera can mean many things. But perhaps Wallace's unyielding stare and hint of a smile can be interpreted as the attitude of a defiant daughter, deliberately conveying to her mother that she will follow her own ways. When this picture was taken in 1971, Wallace was nineteen, *still* in the middle of those years that pitted her against her mother. She is relaxed, nonchalant, almost as if she were waiting for a reaction after making a provocative comment. From this point of view, Ringgold's tilted head and eyes may be seen as scolding, as she responds to Wallace's challenge. She glares at her daughter, perhaps reprimanding her for whatever it is Wallace just said or did. Through her bodily stance, such as in her autobiographical writing, Ringgold assumes authority, maybe to put an end to this familial conflict. On the other hand, perhaps this image captures a moment of complicity, as mother and daughter turn their sight towards each other. They might be sharing their anger or indignation. After all, they are *together* at a protest. Throughout WFOTB, Ringgold's relationship with Wallace takes many turns. At times it conveys frustration. Other times it leans towards pride. But whether scolding or praising, mutual concern brings them close, like in this photograph.

⁵⁶ The core of the protesters demand was for Rockefeller to be impeached and resign as the head of MoMA's board of trustees.

Conclusion

On April 2018 I sat in the fully packed Starr Cinema Auditorium at Tate Modern waiting for Faith Ringgold's artist talk to commence⁵⁷. I was thrilled to hear in person the only woman artist I have written about in this project who is still alive today. When the organisers came up on stage and announced that she would be in conversation with her daughter, Michele Wallace, I was beside myself with delight. I would have the chance to see together the two people around whose relationship I had organised the last chapter and analysis of my thesis.

Ringgold was, is, hilarious. From the onset of the talk she sat scrutinising the audience's reaction as she spoke about race and gender struggles she had gone through to arrive there. She poked fun at the institution, at those who had praised her art but had turned their backs on her when she needed help. When Wallace reminded her that her work was held in famous art collections, like The Guggenheim's, MoMA's and the Harvard Art Museums', Ringgold nodded with satisfaction, meaningfully repeating '... really?' with a smile on her lips.

At eighty-seven, Ringgold is now old. Because of that, her speech is a little slow and sometimes she freezes for a few seconds when she cannot recall a piece of information. Luckily, she had Wallace to assist her. It may have been announced that Wallace would be in conversation with Ringgold, but she was really there to support her. In fact, Wallace is not only the director of the Faith Ringgold Society and one of her most vocal champions, she now accompanies her mother to most public lectures to assist her. And Wallace's attitude is moving. She is tender and attentive towards her mother. Her body, perched on the armrest of the chair, is attuned to Ringgold's words as she carefully listens to her. If Ringgold stumbles, she swiftly picks up the thread with dates, details, anecdotes. If Ringgold goes on, Wallace takes a step back.

⁵⁷ Ringgold's talk at Tate in April 2018 was accompanied by a show at the Pippy Houldsworth Gallery: 'Painting and Story Quilts, 1964-2017.'

As I looked at them, their closeness emphasised something which I know but can be easy to forget: the people I write about are not the same people that move through the world. Authors are not their characters, even when their characters represent them. The Faith Ringgold that emerges from my reading of WFOTB (1995) is a woman artist that defines herself both through family and against her daughter's image of her. The Michele Wallace of *Black Macho* (2015) is her unforgiving but loved, antagonist. Their sharp criticism of each other in those texts contrasts with the symbiosis on stage. The distance between what I knew of Ringgold and Wallace before that evening and what I could see in that moment, reminded me that my understanding of the artist and her daughter is partial, as it can only be.

In a way, coming to the end of this project I have increasingly felt that I know Ringgold, Tanning and Carrington well. But what I know is what their textual selves *have told me* about them, as the artists wrote themselves into existence. Like self-writing, public speech too is a performance, although different. At one point in the night, Ringgold snapped at Wallace. She abruptly told her, 'what's the matter with you?', when the younger woman urged her to move along faster because the talk was encroaching on the Q&A time. In response, Wallace grinned turning her head sideways to give the audience a look of complicity. This deliberate gesture allowed her to show herself as a well-meaning daughter restricted by a bad-tempered but lovable parent. It was not only a reaction, but a staged performance, improvised, yet delivered to amuse the public.

The difference between Wallace's and Ringgold's performance that evening and their personal narratives is that, autobiographical writing generates a sense of intimacy. As I have stressed throughout the thesis, and as Nancy K. Miller argues, autobiographical performance enables us as readers to form of connection with the writer, insofar as she offers her story as form of self-exposure with the hope that what she tells will 'matter' to us (1991, p.24). In this manner, the mode of address in autobiographical narratives encourages the reader to experience herself as the recipient of a confidence. Indeed, Dorothea Tanning speaks to the reader of her memoir as if she were speaking to a friend. She seeks her out to share her feelings: 'Reader! Imagine the pure excitement of living in such a place' (2001, p.145). She prompts her to use

her imagination: ‘Here I will ask the reader to picture a room full of students’ (2001, p.147). Constantly, Tanning calls out to her, projecting herself beyond the text and into the reality of the reader, my reality, but also bringing the reader into the world of the memoir. In this double motion, the borders between the text and its context of reception blur as the writer’s *address* engenders a relationship – or the possibility of a relationship.

It was this mode of address that led me to feel I know the artists I have written about in this thesis. Carrington and Ringgold do not interpellate the ‘reader,’ like Tanning does. But she is implicitly present as an *addressee* positioned in a hypothetical future. In Chapter Five, I discussed in particular how Ringgold’s written self was oriented towards the future in the sense that, her memoir aimed to increase children’s choices and possibilities within the author’s community by presenting her as an inspirational model. However, it has been part of my overall argument in this thesis that projection into the future is a more general characteristic of women artists’ self-writing, to the extent that these writings contribute to changing *who* can be seen as an artist. Autobiographical narratives by women artists, deliberately or not, labour to persuade audiences that the authors are artists, as they give further visibility to their histories. Whether the artist meant to speak to the reader or not, *she does*, as she places her image into the world. Furthermore, to publish one’s personal story is not an ephemeral act. Authors share their narratives knowing that the image of themselves they have chosen to present, though open to interpretation, will remain into existence.

Although not the focus of the thesis, the question of *who* we think about when we speak of an artist has been a driving force in this research. I did not pursue this question because I was interested in giving Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold additional recognition. I certainly wish for these artists to be properly acknowledged, but what I really wanted to explore by analysing how they portray themselves, is how, *who* they are in the stories, might change what we understand by *artist*. If the question of who or what is an artist is important, it is because, whilst it may be argued that the category has relatively opened up in the last century, it still carries a difficult history of exclusion. From Chapter One I addressed how, as Christine

Battersby had argued in 1989, the mythical figure of the great artist or genius had historically been modelled on a white male ideal. This unacknowledged ideal reproduces what Nirmal Puwar has called the ‘somatic norm,’ implicitly portraying women artists and all who do not fit the norm as matter ‘out of place (2004, p.8). From this argument, I developed that women artists’ personal stories could, in addition to constituting alternative histories, redefine the parameters of artistic identity. As these stories rationalise and represent what women artists experience as part of *an* artist’s life, they change what can be imagined through the term artist. Autobiographical narratives, memoirs, and other personal texts can therefore broaden figurative space by showing how women artists inhabit and occupy physical space.

When Battersby returned to the question of artistic identity in a 2013 article, I have discussed how she underlined again the inability of this dominant model to accommodate women. Based on essentialised physical and existential characteristics, *artist* allowed women *no room* to embody this category. At the same time, Battersby also highlighted, that because discourses of creative subjecthood disavow their biases, women were nonetheless encouraged to pursue their creative impulses (2013, p.24). Under the pretence of universality, the dominant model of artistic identity had historically been used to dismiss and discriminate against women, Black artists, as well as artists from other minorities. Art discourses had most frequently portrayed women’s creative desires as *abnormal, lacking, and out of the norm*, but the prevalent model of creative identity did not overtly bar women from entering artistic lives. Families, partners and so-called guardians, might effectively stop women expressing themselves as artists. Artist itself however, offered an attractive promise of impartiality and cultural recognition. As a result, a key task in this thesis has been to examine *when* and *where* implicit ideas about artistic identity have materialised around women’s lives, raising boundaries where freedom of movement was previously assumed.

For instance, an explicit example of how boundaries materialise comes up in Faith Ringgold’s memoir when the artist, looking for representation, goes to show her paintings at the Ruth White Gallery in New York. After looking long and hard at her

'French' inspired paintings, which resemble the ones on the walls around them, the gallerist says to Ringgold pointing with her finger: ' "You"... placing a stress on the word you, "cannot do this"' (1995, p.144). This accusatory moment roots the artist into the reality of her own body. It tells her: 'you,' a woman, 'you,' a Black person, 'cannot do this,' 'you,' cannot paint like this, cannot be represented here. The exchange creates an *us* versus *you* dynamic. The *we* of those who represent the art world and police institutional borders, stands against the *you* of Faith Ringgold, who is told she does not belong there because she is a Black woman. Ringgold then is forced to walk away. But she also writes that this moment helped her 'as an artist' (p.144). It is an instructive moment as it makes visible barriers already in existence. Throughout this thesis, focusing on this type of textual detail, I have been able to show how, due to their gendered and racialised character, certain characteristics attached to dominant notions of creative identity engendered difficulties, especially where women have been expected to occupy feminised roles or fulfil feminised duties. In this example, when Ringgold positions her textual self face to face with Ruth White, she disrupts expectations about *who* usually steps into that gallery. She challenges the gallerist's expectation about *who* paints like she does. Perhaps she also challenges the expectation of readers who might be invested in the same system of meaning as the gallerist. Nonetheless, as subversive as her entering that space is, the gallerist reasserts institutionalised boundaries, as she turns Ringgold away.

This racist and sexist encounter could have been a crushing episode for Ringgold. Instead, the artist uses the narrative to frame her difficulty with Ruth White as a learning experience. That which her textual self has learned about the position she occupies, will now help her push back and draw on alternative sources to develop and sustain her artistic identity – which in her case, I have shown, involves grounding her creative selfhood in the family and in role as a mother. The memoir cannot do away with the constraints Ringgold faces. But it can and does provide her with space to craft her creative self in other terms.

In the sense that WFOTB makes room for creative identity in the domestic and familial sphere, it is quite different from the other two examples I have analysed in this thesis. Where, in Ringgold's memoir I investigated how the family household

functions as a refuge for the artist, in Chapters Three and Four, I considered how the domestic engenders difficulties for women artists due to the roles they are *meant* to fulfil as women in that space. As Griselda Pollock's argues, the notion of artist has often been in conflict with the domestic since these categories were defined as polar opposites with the development of the bourgeoisie (2003, p.49). Mirroring this argument, Tanning's and Carrington's narratives have enabled me to show how the history that places artistic identity and domesticity in opposition, materialises in everyday events and encounters, pulling women artists away from their creative selves. Through Tanning's and Carrington's writings, I have explored how gendered demands consume the woman artists' time, as well as her physical and emotional energy, by asking her to: *tend the house, entertain guests, behave like a lady*, and more.

My aim in illustrating women artists' constraints inside the home, and also beyond in Ringgold's case, has not been only to illustrate discrimination, but to see how women artists have broken free or worked within the confines of their gender identities to portray themselves as artists. So, while Ringgold's position as a Black woman brings up different difficulties from those Tanning or Carrington may have faced, their autobiographical stories *all* contribute to changing what we understand as an artist's existence. Through their writings, the three of them articulate individual responses to the problem of artistic identity that allow them to retain their attachment to creative subjecthood – at least insofar as the reader is concerned. It is in that sense that I have stressed the narrative relies on the reader's presence as *addressee* to convey its message. The reader brings her own biases to the text, but she is relatively limited in her interpretation of the artist by the image the author *projects* through the narrative. In a certain manner, the reader acts as a witness of the author's story as the narrative recounts her challenges *for her* and *to her*, so that ultimately the reader might imagine the artist close to how the artist imagined herself. Nonetheless, the contribution of the narrative to a wider system of meaning does not end with the story. The text comes to broaden or alter the readers' wider pool of knowledge. For the reader, the question of *how* an artist like Ringgold, Tanning or Carrington portrays her everyday life, can challenge dominant models of artistic identity. Following this line of thought, I have attempted to unsettle narrow definitions of

creativity and femininity by showing the ways in which women artists have widened these concepts through particular situations and encounters

There have been unexpected findings along the way, which have influenced which scenes I have focused on when exploring women artists' narratives. When I began investigating the figure of the woman artist, I wanted to get to the root of ambivalence, to understand why certain investments might be harder for women; why was it that it could often be complicated for women to fully assume creative selves? Though I was familiar with the dichotomy between the *artist* and women's traditional roles in the home, I did not know the extent to which the domestic would prove to be *such* a site of contention in women artists' self-writing. Only as I read through stacks of personal narratives, I found domestic and familial gender expectations as a recurring and powerful source of self-doubt. My three case studies, or narrative-based chapters, were consequently organised respectively around three roles or figures predominantly represented as troubling in artists' autobiographical accounts: the wife and housewife, the dutiful daughter, and the caring mother. Domestic space and how women artists negotiate the roles women traditionally assume in that environment thus became a key structuring element in the thesis.

Settled on three usually troubling roles, in Chapter Three I began by exploring women artists' difficulties with the wife and housewife through Dorothea Tanning's memoirs, primarily her second memoir, *Between Lives: An Artist and Her World* (2001). With a textual self profoundly ambivalent towards her creative accomplishments, Tanning's writing provided a bridge through which to connect my insights on women who had given up artistic life, and those who had ploughed through but struggled.

In this chapter, I focused on how, just as Tanning was beginning to acquire recognition, she got involved in a romantic relationship that steered her away from creative selfhood. Discussing women artists' need for creative space, I employed *Between Lives* to explore how Tanning had compromised her artistic self in relinquishing her studio. I stressed how, in very troubling terms, Tanning had described Max Ernst's arrival into her life as a desirable process of self-objectification through which she had become 'his house' (2001, p.64). Through words such as, '[h]e

lived in me, he decorated me, he watched over me,' Tanning had used heterosexual romance to conceal, or rather, reorient her loss. On the other hand, I also explored how the tasks Tanning undertakes in her newly formed *heterosexual household* keep her, much against her desires, '[o]n leave from her canvas' (2001, p.259). Thus, while seemingly frustrated, as the narrative progresses Tanning comes to be increasingly defined by the gender labour she performs under that roof. Indeed, she perseveres in her role as *wife*, even though domestic demands make her feel like a 'call girl,' even though she dreams about the house as 'nest of stone [that] sits upon' her 'chest at night' (2001, p.262). However, despite her distress, Tanning does not reject her duties as a wife. On the contrary, I illustrate how, her persona seems to embrace the role of 'happy housewife' that rationalises her completing these tasks, by building on dominant fantasies of domestic felicity (Ahmed, 2010). Gender performance is a particularly important subject in this part of the chapter as I show how it encourage ritualised exchanges that are meant to engender *true* feeling.

Emphasising how Tanning thus reconciles herself with the role of wife, the chapter argues that, overall, the author organises her story so as to incorporate the distance between her and 'her canvas' in her wider life as an artist. The way Tanning achieves this, I suggest, is by subsuming her duties as a wife under the narrative of romance that keeps her connected to Ernst. While this relationship is the cause of her apparent loss, it also gives her access to artistic identity, because, in her memoir, the older and more established artist comes to represent a gateway into the art world. Given the history that defines domesticity and artistic identity in opposition, the task that *Between Lives* undertakes is complicated. Every small gesture Tanning performs in her daily life seems to directly contradict the fact that she is an artist – the narrator conveys so herself. However, shaping those actions into elements of an all-encompassing narrative, allows the author to impose ontological coherence on her story, crafting her textual self, like Adriana Cavarero has argued, as a 'unified subject' (2000, p.33). So, while Tanning's activities could pull her away from creative subjecthood, Ernst's support and presence confirms her identity as an artist as the author imposes a romantic rationale on her memoir.

In Chapter Four, I moved on to explore how women are pushed to embody traditional gender roles by analysing the figure of the dutiful daughter, principally in relation to three of Leonora Carrington's short stories (1989a, 1989b): *The Oval Lady*, *The Seventh Horse*, and *Pigeon, Fly!* Here I was interested in investigating how, as Luisa Passerini suggested, women can use narrative self-representation to negotiate how they occupy gender roles that would traditionally be understood as subversive (1989, p.189). With that purpose, I analysed Carrington's rebellious alter egos to consider how a woman artist might resist the domestic trajectory which leads her to taking her place in the nuclear family, by *refusing to grow into a woman*.

In this chapter, I focused on how instead of complying with their fathers' prohibitions and rules, Carrington's unruly characters engage in a form of sideways growth through play, personifying and associating themselves with nature and animals to reclaim their freedom and desires. I followed the young girls as they achieved autonomy in the artist's writing by defying patriarchal authority and leaving the familial household behind. At first sight, challenging patriarchal authority in the way Carrington's characters do, seemed benign. For instance, Lucretia in *The Oval Lady's* rebellion, plays a game of 'make believe' where she disguises 'herself into a horse' (1989a, p.41). Seemingly, her actions could be interpreted *only* as children's play. However, as this story and others unfold, it emerges that every detail holds a symbolic meaning in Carrington's writing – so that, in the case of *The Oval Lady*, horses represent the unruly nature of the passionate girl, who will not be tamed into a 'lady.' In this chapter, I thus show how, as the meaning of these symbolic elements becomes apparent, Carrington's stories shift into darker tales by highlighting the violence of gender norms contained in *the home*. Thus, as readers we are carried by the narrative through a process of subversion, where the young girls' increasingly belligerent responses to household discipline, are rationalised as a logical response to the unfair restrictions they experience. From the father's perspective in *The Oval Lady*, Lucretia's playing at 'horses' is a childish act of rebellion. But for the reader, who has been told Lucretia was locked indoors in state of mental 'starvation,' her disobedience acquires extraordinary significance. Her rebellion is justified as a strategy of emotional survival through which she channels her *passions*. Her playing broadens her range of movement beyond what patriarchal authority allows.

Connecting such symbols and metaphors across different stories, this chapter thus enables me to show how, in repeatedly challenging the order of the bourgeois nuclear family, Carrington's protagonists give free reign to their appetite for creative life. In addition, I also argue that her narratives illustrate how the father-daughter dynamic implicit in the surrealist figure of the *femme-enfant* Carrington partially embodies, risks reproducing the original state of subservience her protagonists initially evade. Thus, it is a danger the stories constantly return too from different angles. Ultimately, I suggest that in spite of the protagonists' figurative rebelliousness, the ubiquitous presence of patriarchal hierarchies, personified by the domestic household, abides in Carrington stories as a constant threat to the woman artist's autonomy.

In the final chapter of this thesis, the project takes one final turn. Chapter Five draws on *We Flew Over the Bridge: The Memoirs of Faith Ringgold* to analyse the role of the caring mother. Nonetheless, rather than an impediment to achieve creative identity, in this chapter, I argue that this figure is an intrinsic part of how Ringgold builds her artistic self in her writing. To be a mother appears as disruptive in several women artists' autobiographical texts. In Ringgold's case however, motherhood as well as family life more generally, provide the artist's textual self with the support she lacks in the wider racist environment she inhabits.

In contrast with my previous analyses, here I focus on how the domestic facilitates the development of Ringgold's artistic subjecthood. Indeed, Ringgold grounds her identity so deeply into her position as a mother, that when her daughter Michele Wallace questions her mothering skills by 'giving her no credit as a role model,' I suggest that the author's entire persona is thrown into crisis (1995, p.94). In that sense, motherhood is complicated in WFOTB. On the one hand, being a mother is almost in a traditional way taxing for Ringgold, as domestic labour drains her energy and time. When the children's clothes pile up around her and she spends her days cleaning, the text describes her life as 'a burden' (1995, p.61). However, as I expand in the later part of my reading, the significance of these passages is minor in comparison with her daughters' rebellion when Ringgold tries to pass on to them lessons on how

to survive. In particular, I argue that Wallace's critical comments and attitude towards Ringgold push the artist to portray herself against her daughter's account of their joint family life. Through this argument, I place WFOTB in dialogue with *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (2015) to show how Wallace's stereotyping of her aunt, stepfather, and overall family dynamics, contrasts with Ringgold's ideal of 'extended family.'

In the second part of the chapter, I bring again the two authors together, mother and daughter, as their dialogue expands into other writings. Exploring how their conversation evolves, enables me to suggest that while Wallace's criticism is not always misplaced, Ringgold's *ideal of family* affords her a place of belonging that grounds her artistic self and makes her difficulties in the home secondary. Following this line of argument, I content that as WFOTB comes to an end, Ringgold's writing restores the artist's self-image as a good mother, by detailing how her books seek to instil in children 'the belief that they can change things' (1995, p.261). Her books aim to provide inspiration so that future generations dare to pursue their 'dreams,' like Ringgold states she did. Ultimately, my purpose in this chapter is to show, that whilst traditional gender and domestic roles are problematic for women artists, they do not *always* compete with how they see their creatives selves.

An archive: autobiographical writings to *make room*

In a sense this project has been the study of a series of strategies women artists have developed to address a material problem: how do women live and understand themselves as artists within the stream of difficulties that emerge in their everyday lives, especially in relation to how gender roles intersect or interfere with their creative selves? How do they *make room* for themselves? I have suggested that the different strategies women artists use to negotiate everyday life's demands and expectations in autobiographical writing have something to tell us about how women create room for themselves. I have argued that, individually, each text carries its own success, insofar as it allows its author to claim space for her art, literally and figuratively. Hence, my analysis has sought to underscore how, even when during their lives women such as Tanning, Carrington or Ringgold might not have always

been seen as artists, textual strategies of self-representation enabled them to portray themselves as artists. More importantly, however, I emphasised the ways in which the rhetorical potential of self-writing gave these authors the ability to turn their domestic spaces *also* into artistic spaces. I showed how, through the breadth of the text, women artists could challenge or reconcile actions often opposed to creativity with creativity itself. Throughout, I specifically explored how working with space *through* autobiographical writing can be understood as a creative practice that foregrounds change – as these texts project the rationale women artists develop in articulating their artistic selves into the future.

However, it is significant to also acknowledge that not all the texts I brought together here would generally be understood as autobiographical writings, insofar as standard literary conventions stipulate. I am referring in particular to Leonora Carrington's surrealist short stories of talking birds and passionate horse-girl hybrids. These narratives take explicit creative liberties whilst Tanning's and Ringgold's conform more closely to what we might expect when thinking of autobiographical stories. But as Linda Anderson highlights, we may use 'the markers of genre to insist in what is already known, and to organise the meanings for the reader' (2011, p.10). In a certain manner, this is the process I engaged in as I juxtaposed these three authors through this thesis. However, rather than *insist* on perhaps the most conventional markers of autobiographical writing, I have used textual details about space to tell a different story. I have employed rocking horses, doors and unwashed laundry, to stress *resemblance*, not in terms of a common attitude, but rather, in relation to a shared problem.

I began this project with the premise that, it is difficult for many women artists to assert their creative selves in a world where the term artist is most often still associated with an implicit masculinist model. I saw that even when women artists had no doubts about their identity, difficulties often materialised in their path. For that reason, I became interested in their *responses* to this reality. Each of the three authors I studied brought into the project different genealogies and different histories, however, what they all had in common, is that their personal accounts create space to ground their artistic selves. However, as I have explored in this thesis,

each one of them develops her own particular strategy. For instance, it may be apparent for those who knew about Carrington and Tanning before, that these artists were once respectively in extremely similar circumstances, but then chose to take radically different paths. Tanning and Carrington were both, at one point in their lives, Max Ernst partners, and their relationships with this famous artist are celebrated by many critics as great love stories. But from a more cynical perspective, the fact is that both of these artists were in a relationship with someone who personified the subjecthood they were regularly denied – a man, who also expected them to fulfil gendered duties of love and care. Yet, where Tanning rationalised her ‘wifely’ demands, feeding through her existence her *ravenous* house to support a narrative of creative partnership, ‘Agathe’ warned Leonora’s ‘Eleanor’ to run away from Ernst’s ‘Célestin’ if she did not want to vanish into nothingness. Tanning stayed, and Carrington left, but both their stories used *the home* – its walls, doors and windows – as signifiers of containment and escape. Both negotiated in their own way *how* to inhabit this space of simultaneous possibilities and limitations.

The last piece of writing I brought into the conversation, Ringgold’s WFOTB, was not as different as it first seemed to appear. As Ringgold addressed her own constraints, she used her home to craft a space the art world would not give her. In her writing, plates ‘pilling up’ on the kitchen counter are not a reason to *escape* the domestic or to pretend satisfaction in order to *bring about satisfaction*. Dirty plates are bothersome and they are time consuming, but they are *only* a small detail in a longer trajectory of creative self-making. Like the family household ‘stretches’ in the first pages of her memoir, Ringgold stretched her writing to accommodate her creative personhood in the home, as a mother.

Bringing these three sets of writings together through this project has enabled me to show how to *make art*, women artists also have had to *create room*. Indeed, to create room might be the very condition on which a woman’s life as an artist might depend, independently from how she opens up that space. I have, in developing this thesis, thus emphasised the ways in which crafting a story can be a way to create space for oneself. As these artists worked to represent themselves, they used different rhetorical tactics derived from their contexts and their experiences. However, as

different as their writings are – and as much as some may not be seen as autobiographical writings outside the context of this thesis – I have argued that these texts *resemble* each other in that they can be read as strategies for women artists to claim their creative selves. As Tanning allows her lover to turn her into ‘his house,’ as Carrington smashes the fine household ‘china’ to impair its ability to turn her into a lady, and as Ringgold makes art out of her mother’s ‘bits of cloth,’ I have suggested that each of them rewrites the domestic into the stage of her own artistic becoming – challenging norms and contributing to alternative creative traditions.

Closing observations on reading and interpretation

Throughout this research I have often been asked about my observations on these three artists: ‘are you sure that is how Ringgold saw herself?’ ‘Are you sure that is what Tanning meant in this passage?’ These queries highlight that, as I do, people are invested in a particular image of these artists because Tanning, Carrington and Ringgold are known public figures. But I can never really know an author’s intentions, nor would I claim to. What I have offered throughout these chapters is an interpretation of their words, which as I reflect on in Chapter Two, is shaped by my own experiences. In a way, I am conscious that my ambivalence towards domesticity as I spent my days at home writing played a role in making me nod emphatically when I first read Dorothea Tanning’s memoir. I believe that I found Leonora Carrington’s young girls inspiring because they take the risk of leaving behind all that is familiar to pursue their passion. I felt uncertain when reading Faith Ringgold’s memoir. I did not want to make assumptions rooted in my privilege as a white woman. On the other hand, the kind of networks of support she writes about, resonated with a form of solidarity I had known growing up in a working-class family. It is impossible to map detail for detail why I read how I read but experience always forms part of interpretation. For that reason, this project may be understood as a conversation which, in its final shape, brings these authors and myself as a reader together.

Although my interests have shaped the direction of this thesis, however, the outcome is not simply idiosyncratic. As I touched on before via Miller’s work, the

relationship by means of which an author's 'autobiographical performance' meets the reader as she recognises herself or others in the story, forms the foundation of 'personal criticism' (1991, p.24). Through this connection, 'personal criticism' becomes instrumental in politicising personal experience, as *recognition* facilitates the formation of feminist communities. In this thesis, I committed myself to such a feminist reading of Tanning's, Carrington's, and Ringgold's writings in order to understand under which circumstances women artists have encountered and articulated troubles with their artistic identity. With this aim, I also read numerous other artists, for instance: Anne Truitt (1982, 1986, 1996), Louise Nevelson (1976) or Niki De Saint Phalle (2006). I could not analyse all these texts here due to questions of scope. However, they have been part of this project as an invisible presence that helped me figure out *what* to look for when searching for answers. In that sense, I have approached women artists' 'autobiographical performance' as a form of criticism that has enabled me to problematise figures and expectations which appear as a source of conflict for women artist more broadly. While authors cannot be equated with the textual selves they present, their stories are important because autobiographical narration bears a powerful relation to experience.

Much scholarship about women artists does not operate in the domain of the personal. My strategy in this project has been to bring methodologies and concepts from women and gender studies to bear onto women artists' writings, in order to show aspects of their lives often overlooked. In this manner, I have contributed to feminist scholarship on women artists by addressing elements of their existence which have not been given enough critical attention in the past. I am referring specifically to everyday experiences and feelings as women artists represent themselves through autobiographical writing. Nevertheless, I would argue that no matter the emphasis, my concern with autobiographical narrative as that of other authors interested in women artists' narratives, like Tamboukou (2010a; 2010b, 2010c), Suleiman (2012), Smith and Watson (2010) and more, takes further women artists' projection into the future. By studying and reproducing women artists' autobiographical stories, research on women artists' narratives also contributes to changing the system of meaning through which only certain subjects can be imagined as artists.

Changing the field of signification is thus a collective endeavour that connects this thesis to scholarship in feminist art history, gender studies, and to a broader feminist political project. To that extent, I may say that my thesis has contributed to creating different narratives about women artists, but there is certainly more room to continue exploring this subject through investigating other modes of self-representation. In that regard, I believe that further research on women artists' autobiographical texts and other writings would be very beneficial, potentially also connecting visual artists with women in other creative professions. My project in this thesis has focused on texts that privileged linear narratives and internal consistency. However, what this thesis has not addressed, is that women artists have also produced extremely inventive pieces of experimental self-writing through which they have challenged not only roles and categories, but also that which constitutes writing or representation itself. For example, I would include in this category texts like Claude Cahun's *Disavowals: Or Cancelled Confessions* (2008), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982), Sophie Calle's *Double Game* (2007) and Karen Finley's *Shock Treatment* (2015). Given the opportunity to take this research further, I would like to explore how these other kinds of writing intervene in wider systems of signification, question received understandings of authorial position, and disrupt literary genres, languages, and registers.

I began this project by reflecting on how difficult it can be for women, for me, for all those who do not *exactly* fit ideals and models, to live without, or with only a little, room for creativity. Although there is plenty more building work to be done, I hope that this project has contributed to creating *some room*.

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