Introduction

The 1990s proved to be an exciting period for women's writing in France. It was a decade in which publishers and the media celebrated a 'new generation' of writers, and writing produced by women assumed its place at the forefront of what is new – and sometimes controversial – on the French literary scene. Paperback publishers J'ai lu and Pocket both launched new series (*Nouvelle génération* and *Nouvelles voix* respectively) devoted to new names, among them many new women authors. Thus, a wide-ranging readership was introduced to the work of writers such as Christine Angot, Virginie Despentes, Linda Lê and Lorette Nobécourt at the very same time that these authors were still in the process of establishing their names.¹ On the cusp of a new century and, of course, a new millennium, it is both time and timely to publish this collection of critical essays on writing by women in contemporary France. The writers discussed include a number of important names, such as Angot, Marie Darrieussecq, Régine Detambel and Agnès Desarthe, whose work was first published in the 1990s, as well as providing the first sustained critical evaluations of lesser-known writers like Clotilde Escalle and Louise L. Lambrichs. The volume also includes essays on writers whose work began to gather interest in the preceding decade but who, in the 1990s, were still in the process of becoming firmly established, like Paule Constant, Sylvie Germain, Marie Redonnet and Leïla Sebbar.

In her influential book on 1970s and 1980s French women's writing, one of Elizabeth Fallaize's stated aims is to make the texts she translates in her volume available to anglophone readers and 'recognised as forming part of the pool of texts from which reading-lists are constructed and book-shop shelves filled'.² Similarly, part of our own project in this volume is to

introduce to English-speaking readers, through critical readings, some of the most interesting writing published by women in France in the 1990s. This volume is none the less more than a celebration or commemoration of contemporary women's writing. On the one hand, we and our contributors foreground and explore some of the key themes and issues that we have identified in this particularly dynamic moment for contemporary French women's writing. On the other hand, we are looking forward into the twenty-first century, to the next decades, as we chart the ways in which contemporary women writers are themselves in the process of shaping wider literary debates. In all these ways and in its specific focus on writing by women in 1990s metropolitan France, *Women's Writing in Contemporary France* marks out its difference from existing volumes on French women's writing.³

Historical context

The second half of the twentieth century was a period of substantial change and experimentation in literary writing in France, notably with regard to the novel. The publication in 1948 of Sartre's *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* marked a major turning point in the development and the willed and perceived stature of the novel, since it led many writers and theorists to re-evaluate the relationship between literature and society and the part that could be played by fiction in modifying social attitudes and, ultimately, even societal structures. The influence of writers of *littérature engagée* or 'committed literature' dominated post-war literary culture, with Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir continuing up to – and beyond – the death of Sartre in 1980 and of Beauvoir in 1986. Indeed, in 1981, a survey conducted by the literary magazine, *Lire*, demonstrated that Beauvoir was considered one of the ten most important intellectuals in France, the other writers being the (traditional) novelists Michel Tournier and Marguerite Yourcenar and the poet and artist, Henri Michaux. Furthermore, in many millennium polls conducted in France, the UK and the USA, Camus's *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*) (1942) was voted one of the most important books of the twentieth century. While the political influence of these writers was undeniable, they focused more on content than on form, seeing their novels as vehicles for messages and politico-philosophical debates and thereby maintaining patriarchy's structures through their use of the genre and through their own discourses at the very time that they were questioning post-war society. Beauvoir is still revered

as the mother of feminism, yet her own espousal of, or sharing in, the Sartrean model of writing has caused some second-wave feminists to accuse her of behaving socio-culturally and of writing like a man.⁴

The most radical experiments in novel-writing were undertaken in the 1950s and 1960s by the writers, grouped together under the label of *le nouveau roman*. The group comprised, essentially, Michel Butor, Jean Ricardou, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, with Marguerite Duras and Samuel Beckett as novelists often included in the list of key figures. What characterised all of their work was a rebellion against the traditional 'Balzacian' novel, with its commitment to and dependence on character, plot, and the distinction between form and content. For them, form *was* content, as well as determining it. Consequently, their novels explicitly examine and foreground their own signifying processes, especially the ways in which language can – and must – be used to programme the reader and his or her modes of receiving and processing the text. While their works may today seem outdated and overly self-conscious to some, their experimental audacity undoubtedly continues to exercise an influence on writers and to suggest new ways of engaging simultaneously with the constraints and the possibilities of language and with the function of the reader. In many ways, the *nouveau roman* 'group' was nothing more than a publishing ploy orchestrated by Jérôme Lindon, literary director of Editions de Minuit, and Alain Robbe-Grillet, literary adviser to Minuit and himself both an experimental novelist and a theorist, much as some contemporary women writers are branded and packaged as the 'New Barbarians'. However, the fact that, at one and the same time, several writers were turning their backs on realist literary techniques and assumptions and confronting the need to find new modes of saying and telling has been important in the construction of new ways of writing and reading.

After the seismic events of 1968, the focus of much political, psychological, social and cultural thought became the issue of otherness and difference. Many writers turned their gaze away from the 'failures' of France and Europe towards other cultures which offered alternatives to what they saw as the cultural impasse in which Western Europe was trapped. On the one hand, this involved travelling to the East to explore political and economic alternatives to the American and Soviet models and reconsidering European culture and practices in the light of these discoveries, as with Kristeva's *Des chinoises (Of Chinese Women)* (1974), or Roland Barthes's *L'Empire des signes (The Empire of Signs)* (1970), in which he presents a highly subjective and partial construct of Japan. This new Orientalism

became more and more bound up with questions of individual and collective identity and enabled such recent fictional expressions as Christiane Baroche's *Le Collier* (1992), which, modelling itself on the Arabic traditions of storytelling and calligraphy shows how two cultures are often almost invisibly embedded and implicated in each other and how moral and social codes can never be fixed but must always remain fluid and open to modification.⁵ Interestingly, Baroche chose for her Oriental tale not the conventional novel or short story, but, rather, an album with paintings and calligraphies by Frédéric Clément which counterpoint the written text and present different signifying systems to the reader. *Le Collier* is a hybrid text, one in which language is not privileged but presented as only one of a series of possible expressive media. In this way, the work challenges the reader to reconsider his or her presuppositions about language (and about fiction). Experiments with hybridity are increasingly to be found in the work of today's women writers, with particularly interesting examples being Detambel's exploitation of *implicit* iconicity in her play with the Renaissance genre of the *blason anatomique* and Sophie Calle's photo-textual works which address the nature of the creating subject and its self-implication in the artwork through what can in some ways be seen as illustrated diaries. Significantly, in much recent women's work of this type, the concern with the other and otherness weaves in and out of a concern with the self as creator, created and yet-to-be created.

When the full extent of China's totalitarian oppression was revealed, some French intellectuals turned their gaze in the opposite direction, towards another place of 'exotic' otherness – the USA, which, despite its rampant capitalism and cultural imperialism, was now read as the site of possible cultural transformation and transcendence because of its 'melting pot' nature and the vast variety of its social, ethnic, cultural and sexual groups. While the global dominance of American English continues to be a major source of anxiety for France and the French, its capacity to assimilate and integrate not only the concepts but also the discourses of seemingly endless stream of groups from 'elsewhere' fascinates cultural theorists. It is worth noting, however, that the interest in the USA is expressed mainly in works by male thinkers, the most celebrated recent example being Jean Baudrillard's *America* (1986). While Beauvoir was, for personal as well as intellectual reasons, seduced by North America and while writers such as Paule Constant embed in their works references to America and terms coming from American English, Americanism/Americanisation has hitherto proved much less attractive to women writers than Orientalism.⁶ As

globalisation moves on apace and as the new technologies, ineluctably associated with the USA and the Gates–Microsoft empire, enter our lives ever more permanently, not only with their insidious promotion of American English but also, more positively, with the new possibilities they offer in terms of democratisation, identity formation, self-modification and self-replication, it will be interesting to see whether more French women writers turn their attention to the otherness that is (in) the USA.

In the 1970s, feminist literary criticism drew attention to the stark lack of horizons for women writers in France because of the overarching male dominance of the literary canon. Female authors who came to prominence in the 1990s are the first to benefit from a visibly rich female literary heritage. They write in the wake of the explosion in published writing by women that was an outcome both of feminist movements of the 1970s and of feminist archaeological work which has revealed a heterogeneous female literary tradition that had hitherto been lost from view. In the climate of radical feminist activism of 1970s France, women's writing was heavily politicised. Cixous's *écriture féminine*, which, it must be remembered, was a term that she applied to male-authored texts of the past as much as to women's writing of the future, was a political project. It was conceived in the tradition of the avant-garde as writing which would transgress and subvert literary conventions both through and for the expression of feminine difference or otherness.⁷ *Écriture féminine* itself proved to be impossible to pin down; although part of Cixous's point, this fuelled much controversy and even outright rejection as having little to do with the situation of real women.⁸ None the less, writing by women more generally in France in the 1970s did gain a high profile, making the personal political, bringing into the public domain – into culture – what had previously been considered personal and private and unworthy of literary concern: women's bodies, women's voices, women's experiences and relationships – all from women's perspectives, as diverse as these have proved to be.

The political (feminist) thrust of 1970s French women's writing – in particular the work of Marie Cardinal, Annie Ernaux, Benoîte Groult, Annie Leclerc and, of course, Cixous herself – fuelled much discussion on the aesthetic categorisation of both 'women's writing' and *écriture féminine*. The debate occupied anglophone feminist critics of French literature for some time, muddled and muddled by arguments about essentialism and the pros and cons of asserting the (potentially unitary) identity 'women' over and above the diversity of individual women and different groups of women. The rather controversial search, which was characteristic of

French ‘difference’ feminism, for a language and aesthetics of writing to express women’s own perspectives must be taken in the context of the intellectual climate of that time. In the 1970s, Lacanian psychoanalysis was highly influential, and its focus on language and the Symbolic precluded the expression of what Lacan deemed was inexpressible, especially, that is, women’s sexuality. Predictably perhaps, such an unequivocal decree as Lacan’s worked more to provoke, rather than to prevent, women’s literary experimentation, and, as Fallaize charts, what was at stake in much 1970s writing by women was precisely women’s bodies (Fallaize, pp. 9–14). The essays in this volume on Darrieussecq, Detambel, Escalle and Sebbar show how this theme reverberates in the 1990s even as it has developed in very different ways. The commercial hype and media activity in 2001 surrounding Catherine Millet’s *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.*, an account of the narrator’s voluntary, indeed actively desired, participation in sexual orgies and ‘gang-bangs’ confirms that, in the new millennium, women who write about their bodies continue to be both provocative and controversial.⁹

From their visible, albeit still marginal, position in relation to the mainstream of French literature in the 1970s, women gradually began to accede to a more central place in the 1980s. Two very different writers, Marguerite Duras and Annie Ernaux, became established as commercial and, to a significant degree, literary successes.¹⁰ A number of female authors won both literary recognition and commercial momentum along with literary prizes and appearances on prime-time television shows, and these cautious successes continued into the 1990s with a growing profile.¹¹ As Marion Sadoux’s essay endorses here, Christine Angot’s controversial appearance – or rather performance – on ‘Bouillon de culture’ in the Autumn of 1999, when she attacked a fellow guest, confirmed her status as *le phénomène Angot* and *l’enfant terrible* of the French literary scene.

Reading and writing subjects

If the events of 1968 contributed enormously to the move towards a focusing on otherness and difference as the defining issues for social and personal understanding and development, they also catalysed the dramatic loss of authority that would lead both to Barthes’s seminal essay, ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (1968), which ends with the proclamation that ‘la naissance du lecteur doit se payer de la mort de l’Auteur’ (‘the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author’),¹² and to Michel Foucault’s response in his 1969 lecture, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur?’ (‘What is an

author?'), which examined the institutional mechanisms employed by a society to give authority to a discourse and thereby itself to 'author' it.¹³ The writer had previously occupied a privileged position as a respected and legitimate commentator, even if he or she was regarded as contestatory or subversive, as with Sartre and Beauvoir. However, after 1968, the writer began to be seen as marginal. The irony of Barthes's theorising having itself an authoritative force cannot be denied in the context of the new women writers who were coming to the fore in the 1970s even as they remained marginal to the mainstream literary canon. While some still lament the demise of the writer's oracular status, many seized on this apparent diminution in their social power in order to experiment not only with form but also with subject matter and to push back the frontiers of what was perceived as political. By exposing – and themselves accepting – the fact that every text necessarily articulates an ideology (of which the writer may or may not be explicitly aware), writers have positioned the reader differently and included him or her in their conception of how their texts operate and signify. In this movement, women theorists have played a crucial role, notably through their questionings of gender positions and identities and through their quests for new modes of writing that will *say* rather than *talk about* what it is to be a woman, a sexual and sexualised being, a friend, a mother, a child, etc.¹⁴

In 1980, the poet and theorist, Adrienne Rich, famously wrote of the *compulsory* heterosexuality that lies at the heart of the determining structures of modern society, affirming that at the heart of this compulsory heterosexuality, like a Russian doll, lies a firm and unquestioned belief in sexual difference as a system that operates functionally like a binary opposition – and this belief is often tantamount to considering that sexual difference is indeed itself a binary system.¹⁵ More recently, in a key text, *Masculin/Féminin: la pensée de la différence*, the French social anthropologist Françoise Héritier has considered the ways in which sexual difference, as a determining social structure and mechanism, organises human thought by its imposition of a largely binary model. Reminding us that one cannot conceive of the individual in isolation, since s/he exists only in a relational way, in his or her interactions with others, Héritier analyses the social, which, she argues, is to be understood as a construct of individuals united under a set of somewhat arbitrarily established rules, in which social filiation cannot be reduced to pure biology or anatomy as destiny.¹⁶

Luce Irigaray has convincingly argued that, in ethical terms as much as in political terms, sexual difference is one of the most – if not *the* most –

essential issues to address in the modern world,¹⁷ and this belief, shared by other theorists cited in this volume, underpins much of the thinking articulated by the contributors in their evaluations of individual writers. As we recognise ever more that identity is performative rather than fixed and stable (and, furthermore, that in patriarchy it is usually reactive in its performativity), we rightly become more and more aware of the dangers of essentialist conceptions of what it is to be a woman or a man. However, while it is important to remember that masculinity and femininity are above all culturally specific ideologies and contextually determined practices, it should not be forgotten that the biological body has a more than symbolic role in their formation. Consequently, both individual and collective awareness of the body's physicality and its performance and performativity must be taken into account when seeking to assess femininity or womanness. After all, as Diana Fuss persuasively argues, 'essentialism underwrites theories of constructionism and . . . constructionism operates as a more sophisticated form of essentialism'.¹⁸ The role of the body will be discussed more fully later, but for the moment it is appropriate to highlight recent shifts in our understandings of the subject and the role played in these shifts by the theoretical and creative writings of women.

Julia Kristeva has always had an ambivalent relationship to feminism, and in a 1990 interview on the avant-garde, she argues that, instead of trying to establish 'women's writing' as a homogenous, albeit political, category, women should, rather, value the singularity and diversity that is evident in writing by women, in order to allow for the full expression of individual voices.¹⁹ If, in the 1970s, the experiential was understood as bordering on the essential and fired the search for new forms and new aesthetics of writing, women's writing today has developed into a chorus of diverse, even occasionally discordant, voices. Importantly, women as writers (and artists and filmmakers) are now firmly part of French culture as *subjects* of writing rather than simply as objects of representation (of male desire, fantasy or fear). This is a major achievement, particularly in the intellectual climate of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century, in which the very notion of the subject has been radically called into question. What characteristics enable woman writers to assert their authorial voice in the shadow of the dominant literary conceit of the 1970s, the Barthesian dissolution of the authority of the writing subject over the interpretation of the texts she or he writes? Furthermore, what is the nature of these new female (and/or feminine) writing subjects in the 1990s as they continue to operate in the tension between the postmodern deconstruc-

tion of the subject and a feminist, queer or post-colonial interest in identity politics? On both counts – the postmodern fragmentation of the subject and the demise of authorial power – female/feminine subjects were threatened even as they at last began to come to the fore in French culture.

Kristeva's term, *le sujet en procès* (subject in process and on trial), is rarely used to describe the late twentieth-century subject of women's writing in France, but, in practice, the notion is apposite. Far from privileging a nostalgic pre-Oedipal plenitude, or even a schizophrenic negativity, *le sujet en procès* is a speaking subject which is characterised by its mobility. It allows productively for the disrupting influence of what has been repressed (the semiotic) on the social order (the symbolic) as well as for the slippage of a dynamic subject between what may otherwise be considered opposing terms: for example, between the individual and the collective in concepts of subjectivity and identity; between the autobiographical and the fictional in texts. Indeed, what is most striking about contemporary women's writing is precisely the slippage between these latter two terms, between these two types of writing subject.

The use of the first person in writing by women is extensive, but conventional definitions of genre no longer retain their hold in the 1990s. Third-person narration is, of course, traditionally associated with narrative authority, whereby the writer (or his or her narrator) is vested with omniscience, knowledge and insight. First-person narration, on the other hand, is usually received as being perhaps sincere, but necessarily to be read with a certain scepticism, since it is personal and subjective – autobiographical, and therefore prone to the partiality of memory and the foibles of prejudice. The privileging of 'objectivity' over 'subjectivity' goes back to the Enlightenment's elevation of, and dependence on, reason and rationality. However, in fictional texts, both the first person and the third person are equally artificial. Why then believe one rather than the other? Why choose objectivity – or 'sincere' subjectivity, for that matter – rather than its apparent opposite? As can be seen in many of the works discussed in this volume, the distinction between first-person and third-person narration is dissolved by several writers. Building on the experiments with point of view and narrative voice carried out by Nathalie Sarraute and especially Marguerite Duras, today's writers see fiction not as the vehicle for dissemination of information and ideas or even the locus of the construction of meaning but rather as the site of an exploration both of the self as other and of the self as a discernible and familiar identity.

Indeed, much contemporary women's writing does not sit comfortably with a distinction between autobiography and the novel, even allowing for the fact that all autobiography has its fictional aspects, and fiction, to a greater or lesser degree, emanates from the life or concerns of the author – as, in this volume, Margaret-Anne Hutton analyses the extent to which Sylvie Germain's Christianity is in tension with her literary aesthetics. The misfit does not, however, warrant the creation of a subcategory, 'the autobiographical novel', or even a blurring of the category 'novel' towards a less specific idea of 'fiction', or of 'non-fiction' towards *récit* (narrative); and it is certainly not a question of imposing biographical criticism on creative works of art. Already in the 1970s and 1980s, writers like Cixous and Ernaux (and their publishers) eschewed generic classification on the covers and title pages of their books, the very ambiguity of genre being part of the point. In the 1990s, Christine Angot was one of the writers at the forefront of this trend, in which new relations between autobiography and fiction were actually in the process of being forged. The hybrid term *auto-fiction* is certainly useful here (as Marion Sadoux reasons in her essay on Angot in this volume). However, as recent post-colonial theorising has shown, the hybrid, for all its liberating potential, also risks homogenising anew. The existence of a 'third term' does not necessarily allow for greater flexibility or nuancing than the binary system of identification that fixes meaning – and people – as either 'one' or the 'other(s)'.²⁰ Rather, in the tradition of earlier avant-garde movements, we are seeing the strategic use of play between previously understood generic categories upon which a more monolithic notion of the literary canon (or 'Literature' with a capital 'L') rests. On the one hand, this play may be (or at least claim to be) a politically subversive move in itself. On the other, however, it points to the inability of old criteria of classification to accommodate the writing of a new generation of writers who need not only to mark out their own stylistic originality but also to introduce 'new objects of thought' into their writing.²¹ What is required is that 'autobiography' and 'fiction' are rethought as a literary continuum rather than as separate, albeit themselves hybrid, categories.²²

This development is not, it has to be said, restricted to writing by women; for example, Angot's interstitial work builds on, even as it marks out its space as difference from, what has gone before. Rejecting the novel as a satisfactory form of writing, even within the very texts which were categorised *roman* (novel), Angot's work has affiliations with that produced by male writers such as Hervé Guibert and Serge Doubrovsky as

well as with female precursors from outside the French tradition, like Gertrude Stein.²³ However, in Angot's case, the impetus for the change in writing style, both for the writer within the texts and for the author who writes the texts we read, each of whom is Christine Angot, is motherhood. This is not to say that becoming a mother has changed Angot's own style of writing – although the possibility remains – but rather to say that she renders it so within the text. In her 'novel', *Léonore, toujours*, the narrator/writing subject is forced into ever more mobility as she negotiates the tensions between being a mother, being a woman with a particular psycho-social history, and being a writer.

In pushing at the limits of genre, in working at the very boundaries between reality and text – boundaries she both contests and reaffirms – in exploring (the sometimes unacceptable nature of) fantasy as integral to reality rather than in opposition to it, Angot engages with contemporary literary debate as, by means of her writing, she moves it on. The always uncertain relationship between Angot's first-person narrator (Christine Angot), the real-life woman (Christine Angot) and the Foucauldian author-figure (Christine Angot) presents a challenge to the reader, who is moreover confronted with, and may even be implicated in, statements which may offend and shock, such as: 'Si on me donne le choix entre violée et lesbienne [pour Léonore], je prends le viol' (*Léonore, toujours*, p. 46) (If I had to choose [for Léonore] between being raped and being a lesbian, I'd choose rape); or 'Comme tous les mongoliens, la fille de Maurice Compaign est laide' (*Normalement*, p. 58) (Like all Down's Syndrome children, Maurice Compaign's daughter is ugly). In turn, however, Angot's stage-managed confusion means she does not – and cannot – completely dissociate herself from her textual narrator and thus, as author, does not let herself off the hook. Christine Angot, in whatever way we choose to understand that persona, is implicated – and implicates herself – in her readers' interpretations of her writing. The uncertain status of a narrating 'I', as performative as Angot's, at once announces and undermines the writing subject, producing a slippery *sujet en procès* which provokes and resists at the same time, and setting up a politics of reading which tempts (re-)containment and (re-)appropriation of the writing subject even as it works against it. The writer/narrator Angot's subsequent counter-statements and claims, within her texts, to be misinterpreted are an intrinsic part of what has been seen as a narcissistic monologue, but which, by its provocative nature, is rather an ongoing *dialogue* that she and her texts are enacting with her readers. As Johnnie Gratton suggests in his discussion of Sophie Calle's

phototextual projects in this volume, the tension between experiment and experience and the self-implication that is involved is a risky business for contemporary (women) writers and artists.

In *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years*, in the wake of the dominance of the *nouveau roman* in French literature during the 1950s and 1960s, and in the context of debates about the future of 'the novel', Elizabeth Fallaize and Colin Davis identify three 'returns': 'the return to history, the return of the subject and the return of storytelling' (p. 13). In the texts discussed in this volume, the subjects who have 'returned' range from strong subjects to subjects in deep crisis, all asserting their gendered experiences – as mothers, as lovers, as abused daughters, as perpetrators of violence, as *voyeuses*, as writers. Here, the female subject is sometimes traumatised (Angot, Chawaf, Constant, Darrieussecq, Lambrichs), misunderstood (Desarthe), or on a quest for identity (Redonnet), yet elsewhere in this volume, more positive formulations are to be found. In Margaret Majumdar's analysis of Sebbar's work, the female subject subverts the subordinating gaze. In Gill Rye's reading of Baroche's novels, narrative uncertainty is an enabling factor leading to transformative possibilities in the gendered subject. In Michael Worton's discussion of Escalle, the female subject is not so much a victim of sexual violence as an agent of transgression.

In all these works, there is a concern not only to tell stories, but also to tell women's stories, all of which are, in one way or another, variations of Woman's story. And they want to tell, to *say*, rather than to describe or embellish, hence the sparseness of the discourse of writers such as, say, Angot or Escalle. We should remember, also, that narrative structures are inherently conservative and that to change them requires considerable conviction – and creative energy. Narratives enable us to navigate and to order our emotions, to understand and evaluate the work of our senses, and thereby to engage with – and, ultimately, to shape – the world. Narratives also bind us socially to others. Without shared narratives and without a shared grasp of how narrative functions (even if this functioning is not always successful), we are isolated and it becomes impossible to establish any identity: without the other's presence in our actions as much as in our minds, we cannot develop or separate ourselves from the prison-house of solipsism.

While femininity/womanness continues to be a social and political phenomenon, it needs to be increasingly recognised as a personal narrative or representation. Writers share their concerns with their readers in uncertainty and often with hesitation, rather than handing them down from an

Olympian height or from some oracular cave. They turn inward toward themselves, not (only) because that is what they know best but because that is where they can best explore what it is to be in the world, to have a sense of *Dasein*.

Writing the body

In his part-autobiographical study, part-theoretical treatise, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, the theorist affirms that ‘the body is irreducible difference, and it is also at the same time the principle of all structuration’.²⁴ It is undeniable that each of our bodies is absolutely unique, yet it is equally true that the body is what we have in common with everyone else and also that it is what structures all social relations, being both the site of desire and the outward image of inner changes. Furthermore, and crucially, the body is invisible: it is what we are, yet we cannot ever see it in its totality. The gaze of the other sees us and our bodies ‘better’ than we can ever see ourselves, and for this reason our relationship with our individual bodies is necessarily not only mediated by but also facilitated by the other who stands outside us yet is borne inside us. Furthermore, the body is simultaneously both the self-centring site of desire, and therefore intensely personal, and also the locus of manifestations of inner changes, and therefore ineluctably public. And, crucially, the individual body must remain invisible to the person who inhabits it and is defined by it: it is what we can never *see* properly, even if we can *feel* it totally. The communication of the feelings aroused by this knowledge is one of the great challenges of contemporary fiction: there is the need to write the body – to bring it into view and into existence – yet the more one focuses on one’s own body and personalises the definitions and descriptions of it, the more one potentially risks losing one’s reader. However, in the work of today’s women writers, the personalising of the body is no privatisation or appropriation or manipulation of power through secrecy and overcoded referentiality. It is a staging of difference, a play of and with representation that entails a repositioning of the question(s) of gender outside the traditional binary oppositions of male–female and heterosexual–homosexual.

The body is the site and the living proof of mortality, as it sags, sickens and ages; it is also the site and the (submissive) medium of social control, as its activities and its very shape are determined by institutional(ised) rules and norms. To write the body is therefore to engage in a political act as much as in a personal one. And to write the body is different from writing

about the body or even on the body. It is to say and thereby bring into presence in the imagination of the reader something which is in essence radically other and absent.

We cannot see our bodies totally. However, we should not as a result fall into the trap of hoping to find some impossible, unified body, as can occur during the mirror stage of psychic development discussed by Lacan.²⁵ None the less, the body is often represented societally and consequently even internally as a protective dwelling place, the locus of whatever certainty we can have, our one true home. This is, of course, a fiction, but it has force, and so any narratives that present the fragmentation or fragility of the body are threatening and induce anxiety.

The dislocation, exploitation and dismemberment of the body operated and represented in much of the recent fiction under consideration here should be seen in the context of the controlling mechanisms of patriarchy which the writers wish to transgress. As women take possession of their bodies and of what may or may not be done with them, they may choose to engage in sexual practices that not only express their liberation from oppressive norms but also challenge social conventions and defy established taboos. This enterprise is, it must be noted, not solely one of sexual exploration or of the quest for (new) pleasure; rather, it is a search for agency and autonomy. In these circumstances, the use of narrative is appropriate, for interdictions, taboos and transgression are, as Georges Bataille, has shown, bound together in a powerful narrative structure: 'Transgression belongs to humanity given shape by the business of work. Transgression itself is organised. Eroticism as a whole is an organised activity, and this is why it changes over the years'.²⁶ According to Bataille, taboos are fundamentally irrational in absolute human terms, although they are certainly necessary for society to function and control; for this reason, Bataille goes so far as to make the controversial statement: 'The taboo is there in order to be violated' (p. 64). Today's women writers understand the power of the taboo, but they question its validity and challenge its authority. To take one example: Bataille notes the way in which we 'fence off certain areas to be kept free of sexual activity'; these areas 'protected' from eroticism include the doctor's surgery where 'the most intimate kind of nakedness is not obscene' (p. 216). In Escalle's *Où est-il cet amour*, the novelist precisely confronts this taboo, making of the consulting room not only a trysting place for illicit sexual encounters between the gynaecologist and his patients (whom he will later abort) but also the site of necrophiliac desires and enactments. The effect is to shock, but it also

engages the reader in (anxious but ultimately healthy) speculation on the role of taboos and the nature of both direct and vicarious transgression.

The focus on women's bodies and women's desires has led to accusations that some of the new writing is little more than pornography. One can see that works such as Millet's *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* lend themselves to being considered pornography passing themselves off as literature in order to gain cultural legitimacy – as well as millions of euros in royalties! However, in the past decade, attitudes towards pornographic writing have changed. In her introduction to *Making Violence Sexy* (which mainly considers male heterosexual pornography), Diana E. H. Russell differentiates between the pornographic and the erotic according to one key moral criterion: respect for the other, whoever or whatever that other may be. For her, pornography is material that combines exposure of the genitals with abuse and degradation, and she insists that it is not the acts depicted or described that are pornographic but the position of the pornographer.²⁷ In other words, there is nothing inherently immoral or pornographic about engaging in or representing 'perverse' sexual acts as long as respect is maintained. This position seems clear and useful. However, it does pose the question of whether we do really know what 'respect for the other' is.

If women are to exist autonomously in society, they need to explore their own relationship with sexuality, eroticism and even violence. As Linda LeMoncheck puts it: 'Without the ability to create a woman-identified model of the relation between sex and power, feminists have no way of loosening the patriarchal stranglehold on defining sexual power as the power of victimization'.²⁸ A woman-identified model does not mean that only women can understand or work with it; rather, it is a model which calls into question the ways in which (male-determined) society operates its regulatory and monitoring procedures. The 1990 *Operation Spanner* case is a different but useful example of how society deals with sexual activity that deviates radically from its norms. The police came into possession of videotapes of a group of gay men who engaged in sadomasochistic sex. This involved hitting the penis with a ruler, caning and dripping hot wax on the genitals, all of which are activities not normally associated with gay sex. However, crucially, all were consenting adults. Fifteen of the men were given criminal convictions, five of these being prison sentences. They appealed to the European Court of Human Rights, which, in 1997, upheld the convictions on the grounds that assault cannot be consented to. The implications of this case are grave, for it is evident that the state (in this case, both the individual sovereign state of the UK and the federated state of the

European Union) has usurped and diminished personal rights and, more importantly perhaps, has removed responsibility for one's actions from anyone engaging in 'perverse' activities – which are not actually forbidden by legislation but which contravene the social code of what is permitted. Musing on this case in *A Defence of Masochism*, Anita Phillips concludes that 'this backlash against sexual freedom is the same kind that first brought masochism into disrepute over a century ago. From being an illness, it is now definable as a crime'.²⁹

Transgression is therefore not merely a question of contravening moral codes; it risks bringing the perpetrator into conflict with the aptly named forces of law and order. Within this context of increasing state interventionism into private lives (despite legislation such as the Human Rights Act 2000), the act of writing transgressively becomes both more daring and more necessary as there is an ever greater need to fuse the personal and the political, the fictional and the lived, the subject and the object, the victim and the oppressor.

Trauma

A significant number of the chapters in this volume are concerned with pain, loss or death and throw into relief a darker side to women's writing in the 1990s. This trend – and its prevalence allows it to be identified as such – points to a trauma at the heart of the writing subject and indicates that much women's writing is produced in response to the experience of loss or pain. This is not the same loss or lack or absence that has been theorised (in psychoanalysis, in philosophy) as being at the heart of women's identity,³⁰ though some examples may be particularly connected with women's experiences in a still male-dominated society – vis-à-vis the trauma that, Shoshana Felman argues, women's lives implicitly contain.³¹ In particular, as Siobhán McIlvanney's chapter on *beur* writers argues, the texts of first-generation French-born Algerian writers involve the negotiations for identity between French culture and education and Algerian culture and repressive family relationships. As we have seen above, the 1970s saw a search, in writing, to express the inexpressible – a reparative impulse, in which the subject – women as subjects – came into being in and through writing. Over the past decades, the diversity of writing by women shows they have both created the cultural loci and found countless different voices in which to become, precisely, subjects of writing.

Traumatic experience is of course not gender specific but rather part

of the human condition. The twentieth century saw the publication of a significant number of ‘witnessing’ texts, by both men and women, bringing into the literary domain, for example, the accounts of Holocaust survivors and AIDS victims.³² ‘Traumatic experience’ can be understood more widely, however, to include the loss – the death – of loved ones, abuse (physical, mental or sexual), terminal illness, exile and experience of collective tragedies: wars, terrorist attacks, major accidents, natural disasters.³³ Indeed, the currency of the term has led Hal Foster to identify a general tendency in contemporary culture ‘to redefine experience, individual and historical, in terms of trauma’, linked to the theoretical and cultural return of the subject we have discussed above. In trauma discourse, trauma entails a loss of self, but is at the same time an event that guarantees the subject – the traumatised subject – as ‘witness, testifier, survivor’.³⁴

Trauma is, by definition, what cannot be narrated, but, as Victoria Best shows in her analysis of dreams in Louise L. Lambrichs’s work in the opening chapter of this volume, narrative can be identified as fundamental to the process of healing or, at least, to the validation of the traumatic experience. Analysts of life writing, like Suzette Henke in *Shattered Subjects*, value above all the act of writing itself as therapy.³⁵ Still other theorists point to the importance of the reader. In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub address Holocaust witnessing principally, but their sensitive discussion of the problematics of listening to – and reading – testimonial accounts can inform more widely.³⁶ The point of bearing witness is to communicate the experience or event, and thus the listener has to take responsibility as ‘the enabler of the testimony’ (p. 58). In the healing process, the listener/reader is likewise crucial to this process as ‘an *addressable other* . . . who can hear the anguish of one’s memories and thus affirm and recognize their realness’ (p. 68).

Felman and Laub do not deny, however, that reading harrowing accounts of traumatic loss is risky – to the reader and to the writer. Not only does the witness, therapeutically, need the listener or reader to enable the testimony and to validate the account, but also the interpretation of the reader is needed, textually, to make the text meaningful. Indeed, if trauma is literally unspeakable – if it cannot be narrated – then the reader must locate it in the gaps, in the ellipses, in the metaphors and images, rather than in the story that is being told. In this volume, Kathryn Robson shows how the figure of the female vampire in Chantal Chawaf’s *Vers la lumière* gives voice to the unspeakable loss of the narrator’s mother as, elsewhere, she reads the trauma of childhood sexual abuse in the fragmentary aesthetics of

Béatrice de Jurquet's writing.³⁷ Literary testimonies can challenge the limits of our practices of reading. How should we – and, indeed, can we – ethically negotiate the tension between reading as listening to a testimony and reading as interpretation of a text? It is precisely this challenge that, in Chapter 5, Elizabeth Fallaize's analysis of Jacques Lacan's daughter Sibylle's *Un père: puzzle* makes explicit. Fallaize tackles the power of the intellectual legacy of Lacan-*père* on readings of the daughter's autobiographical text (about her father), and, creatively, suggests alternative theoretical frameworks through which to read it.

One particular framework that lends itself to reading narratives where traumatic experience is evident is psychoanalyst Melanie Klein's work on mourning, employed in Chapter 4 in Gill Rye's reading of Paule Constant's little girl characters. Klein's account, as set out in her essay 'Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states' (1940), differs from Freud's more well-known 'Mourning and melancholia' in several ways.³⁸ In particular, Klein conceives of the mourning of lost loved ones throughout life as reworking the psychical processes of early infancy which enable the child to deal with the loss of, or separation from, the primary love object (for Klein, the mother) and to become an independent individual. This involves both destructive and reparative impulses, the conflicts of which are worked through over a period of time, resulting, on the one hand, in the internalisation of a realistic (rather than idealised) lost love object, and on the other, in the rebuilding of the self that has been damaged by the loss. The psychical work involved in reparation renders Kleinian mourning a creative process, and Klein herself indeed valued the creativity of art and literature as an important part of the process of dealing with loss. The number of texts by women that deal directly or indirectly with experiences of loss point to the reparative nature of writing even as they attest to women's survival and creativity in the face of loss of all kinds, from the everyday to the apocalyptic.

Identity

According to Klein's work, negotiations with loss are defining moments of the self, from the perspectives both of originary loss and, in mourning, throughout life. For Klein, the self is psychically determined: the inner and outer worlds interact, but it is the work done in and by the psyche that makes us what we are. Moreover, the ways in which infantile conflicts are dealt with, psychically, determine our relations with others throughout life.

Psychoanalysis continues to be an influential discourse of the self into the twenty-first century, and is the motor for both Victoria Best's perceptive teasing out of the complexities of Lambrichs's *Journal d'Hannah* and Robson's analysis of the image of the vampire in Chawaf's work, as well as Rye's placing of Constant's *Confidence pour confidence* at the heart of this writer's œuvre. Psychoanalysis is not, however, the only way of thinking about our/selves and our identities. Sociologists, such as Liz Stanley, eschew the unconscious and consider that identity is, above all, forged socially in and by relations with others.³⁹ For her part, Carolyn Steedman looks to the way memories and desires are transmitted across generations in a case study of her own family, in order to supplement the shortcomings of sociological, economic, historical and psychoanalytical accounts in explaining how the individual consciousness of social class becomes an aspect of identity.⁴⁰ In this volume, Aine Smith examines the role of memory in relation to writing and the photograph and its place in the constitution of identity in the work of Marie Redonnet.

The self had become a complex phenomenon in late twentieth-century discourse, and terms like 'the subject', 'the self', and 'identity' are understood differently depending on whether they are being used in psychoanalytical, sociological, political, philosophical or textual contexts or within perspectives such as ethnicity, sexuality or gender. 'Identity' is, on the one hand, a positive political category of perception and locus from which to speak in identity politics. On the other hand, from a more philosophico-literary standpoint, identity is linked with representation, and thus may be considered to be dangerously retrospective – always already at risk of being fixed and frozen into stereotypes.⁴¹ The main problematic of identity relates to the gaps between the two positions of self-perception and the perceptions of others. We have already noted above the mobility of the writing subject in much contemporary literature. If the subject is, here, 'a position of enunciation' and thus structural, identity, according to Margaret Whitford in her discussion of Irigaray's work, is 'imaginary' and 'pours itself into the available structures to form representations'.⁴² Representations 'flesh out' the subject, but, in order to avoid rigidity, identity also needs to be thought as dynamic.⁴³ Chapter 8 shows how Baroche's use of uncertainty avoids the fixing of identities and self-other relations in a none the less realist mode of writing.

The chapters in Part II, 'Writing the dynamics of identity', are most centrally concerned with this issue. Between them, they plot, temporally as well as spatially, the vagaries of identity, the intersections between the individual

and the group, the interconnections between self and other, as in Siobhán McIlvanney's discussion of *beur* identity. None the less, identity, in all its heterogeneity, is actually a unifying factor in this book, since all the essays relate to it, in one form or another, from Elizabeth Fallaize's weaving of the photo of Sibylle Lacan on the cover of her book into that author's search for understanding of her paternal legacy to Marie-Claire Barnet's discussion of Régine Detambel's inscription and dissection of the writer in the aesthetics of her writing.

As society changes rapidly, the place of literature in it naturally becomes modified, the role and the function of readers change, and writers assume a different position both within and in relation to social structures. One of the most welcome features of recent years has been the turn towards ethical criticism and a greater understanding of the fact that the stories we tell and hear or read are not merely reflections of the society in which they are produced but are reflections *on* it. More even than this, they play an important role in determining how we respond to experience and what we are, both as individuals and as members of a community. Furthermore, they contribute significantly to the shaping of the values that underpin society and permit the bonding that is essential if that society is to cohere and survive. As Colin McGinn puts it in *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction*:

Stories can sharpen and clarify moral questions, encouraging a dialectic between the reader's own experience and the trials of the characters he or she is reading about. A tremendous amount of moral thinking and feeling is done when reading novels (or watching plays and films, or reading poetry and short stories). In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that for most people this is the primary way in which they acquire ethical attitudes, especially in contemporary culture. Our ethical knowledge is aesthetically mediated.⁴⁴

McGinn is right to stress that we feel as well as think when reading fiction – and he is also right to equate them syntactically, since the feeling is of the same order of creative seriousness as the thinking. However, one might go further than McGinn and suggest that our ethical knowledge is not only aesthetically mediated but is actually to a great extent determined by the stories that we read – and by the stories that can be told (and published). In the Introduction to *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum argues that literary works are concerned among other things with extreme emotions such as those of grief, pain and loss. These texts are sometimes difficult to read, but they are crucial testaments in the modern world, since they are

‘subversive of morality narrowly construed’.⁴⁵ As we have suggested above and as several of the chapters in this volume discuss, suffering and pain are real and so must be said and told. Yet the saying is more than narrowly, personally therapeutic: it is reparative, recounting the past survival of women, demonstrating and proclaiming survival and creation in the present of the writing and the reading, and promising future survival to those who have yet to encounter loss and trauma.

As we move decisively into the third millennium, the world is undergoing massive transformations, not only technologically, politically, legally, economically, demographically but also in personal relations and in how we perceive ourselves and others. The essays in this book throw light on these changes, and affirm that contemporary French women’s writing functions at once as a reflection of the changing times and as a space for innovation. The women who write are exploring and experimenting with form, genre, aesthetics and representation, as they cross boundaries and as they push at the old limits and freedoms of textuality.

Notes

- 1 See Emilie Grangeray, ‘Nouvelle génération’, *Le Monde* (8 October 1999), www.lemonde.fr.
- 2 Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Women’s Writing: Recent Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), p. 2.
- 3 Other volumes can be divided into four main categories: (a) Anthologies: see, for example, Mary Ann Caws *et al.* (eds), *Écritures de femmes: nouvelles cartographies* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), a wide-ranging anthology of texts selected from across the twentieth century and across a broad sweep of French and francophone cultures, arranged thematically with short introductions; Madeleine Cottenet-Hage and Jean-Philippe Imbert (eds), *Parallèles* (Quebec: L’Instant même, 1996), a critical anthology of short stories by women in French; Fallaize’s *French Women’s Writing: Recent Fiction*, which, together with a substantial and informative introduction, presents introductions to and English translations of selected 1970s and 1980s texts; Martin Sorrell (ed.), *Elles: A Bilingual Anthology of Modern Poetry by Women* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1995), poetry in both French and English with a bio-bibliographical introduction by each author whose work is included; (b) Collections based on conference papers: see, for example, Ginette Adamson and Eunice Myers (eds), *Continental, Latin-American and Francophone Women Writers* (Lanham and New York: University Press of America, 1987 (vols. I and II); 1997 (vols III and IV)), drawn from a series of conferences in the 1980s; Michael Bishop (ed.), *Thirty Voices in the Feminine* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), a collection of short papers from a 1994 Canadian conference on contemporary French and Canadian women’s writing; (c) Collections of critical essays: for example, Margaret Attack and Phil Powrie (eds), *Contemporary French Fiction by Women*:

Feminist Perspectives (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1990), a volume of essays focusing on narrative and gender identity in a wide range of authors; Alex Hughes and Kate Ince (eds), *French Erotic Fiction: Women's Desiring Writing 1880–1990* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), essays on erotic fiction by women over the last century; Sonya Stephens (ed.), *A History of Women's Writing in France* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), a collection of essays which treat historical periods from the Middle Ages to the late twentieth century, the latter period including separate essays on women's fiction, autobiography, theatre, poetry and feminist literary theory; (d) Monographs: for example, Michele Bacholle, *Un passé contraignant: double bind et transculturation* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), on Farida Belghoul, Annie Ernaux and Agota Kristof; Colin Davis and Elizabeth Fallaize, *French Fiction in the Mitterrand Years: Memory, Narrative, Desire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), an analysis linking selected fiction texts by both male and female writers to socio-political and cultural issues; Jeannette Gaudet, *Writing Otherwise: Atlan, Duras, Giraudon, Redonnet, and Wittig* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), a discussion of one text by each of the named authors; Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing 1848–1994* (London: Athlone, 1996), a survey of the last 150 years; Warren Motte, *Small Worlds: Minimalism in Contemporary French Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), which brings together under the theme of minimalism analyses of ten diverse texts, including three by women (Bernheim, Ernaux and Redonnet); Susan Sellers, *Language and Sexual Difference: Feminist Writing in France* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), selected fiction of the 1970s and 1980s read in tandem with French feminist theory.

In addition, an increasing number of studies are being published dedicated to the rich and culturally diverse body of francophone writing, among them many specialising on female authors. See, for example, Laurence Huughe, *Écrits sous le voile: romancières algériennes francophones, écriture et identité* (Paris: Publisud, 2001); Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt and Najib Redouane, *Parcours féminin dans la littérature marocaine d'expression française* (Toronto: La Source, 2000); Nicki Hitchcott, *Women Writers in Francophone Africa* (Oxford: Berg, 2000).

- 4 See Toril Moi's discussion of the reception of Beauvoir in her chapter, 'Politics and the intellectual woman: clichés and commonplaces in the reception of Simone de Beauvoir', in Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 73–92.
- 5 Christiane Baroche, *Le Collier*, illustrations by Frédéric Clément (Paris: Ipomée-Albin Michel, 1992).
- 6 Constant's Goncourt-winning novel *Confidence pour confidence* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), discussed in Chapter 4 is actually set in the USA, the academic setting of which is similarly taken up – and criticised – by Catherine Cusset's *Le Problème avec Jane* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). Cusset lives and works in the USA, like other French women writers before her, not least Marguerite Yourcenar and Monique Wittig. Africa is a more frequent other than the Orient in French women's writing, albeit in a different way. Like Duras's Indo-China or Linda Lê's Vietnam, this is an other within in the writing of the generation of writers who grew up under French colonialism, and is evident in, for example, Constant's Africa novels and the work of Marie Cardinal and Hélène Cixous. A recent

example of fascination with the Orient is Luce Irigaray's *Entre Orient et Occident* (Paris: Grasset, 1999).

- 7 See for example, Morag Shiach, *Hélène Cixous: A Politics of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1991); Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).
- 8 For an example of this type of criticism, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 9 Catherine Millet, *La Vie sexuelle de Catherine M.* (Paris: Seuil, 2001). See also the Dossier, 'Quand les femmes disent tout', *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 1907 (24–30 May 2001), pp. 4–12.
- 10 At the age of 70, Duras was awarded the Prix Goncourt in 1984 for *L'Amant*; in the same year, Ernaux won the Prix Renaudot for *La Place*. Ernaux's work is not only popular with French and Anglo-American readers but it has also generated substantial academic interest. However, some of her writing is still criticised as not being much to do with 'literature' (see Lynn Thomas, *Annie Ernaux: An Introduction to the Writer and her Audience* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), p. 147) and indeed Ernaux has an ambivalent relationship with the term, the writer-narrator of *Une femme* professing that she wants to write 'au-dessous de la littérature' ('a cut below literature'), whatever that might be taken to mean (Annie Ernaux, *Une femme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), p. 23; *A Woman's Story*, trans. Tanya Leslie (London and New York: Quartet Books, 1990), p. 13).
- 11 Major literary prizes went, in the 1980s and 1990s, to a number of French and francophone female authors. Following Duras's 1984 Goncourt success, the prize was won by women in 1996 (Pascale Roze) and 1998 (Paule Constant). The Prix Renaudot went to several women authors in the 1980s and 1990s: Danièle Sallenave (1980), Ernaux (1984), Raphaëlle Billetdoux (1985), Dominique Bona (1998) and Martine Le Coz (2001). The Prix Médicis, which Hélène Cixous had won in 1969 for *Dedans*, was awarded in the 1980s to Christiane Rochefort (1988) and, in the 1990s, Emmanuelle Bernheim (1993) and Jacqueline Harpman (1996). The Prix du roman de l'Académie Française was dominated by male authors in the 1970s, but in the 1980s was won by Liliane Gignabodet (1983), Frédérique Hebrard (1987), Geneviève Dormann (1989) and in the 1990s by Paule Constant for *White spirit* in 1990, Calixthe Beyala (1996), Anne Wiazemsky (1998) and Amélie Nothomb (1999) for *Stupeur et tremblements*. The Prix Fémina, awarded historically to more women writers than other prizes, was won by Sylvie Germain in 1989 for *Jour de colère* and in the 1990s by Geneviève Brisac (1996), Maryline Desbiolles (1999), Camille Laurens (2000) and Marie NDiaye (2001). In the 1990s, women authors were well represented among the winners of the Prix du Livre Inter, including Agnès Desarthe (1996) for *Un secret sans importance*. Bernard Pivot's 'Apostrophes' (1975–90) and 'Bouillon de culture' (1991–2001) were important and democratising forums for writers and provided a valuable impetus to book sales.
- 12 Roland Barthes, 'La mort de l'auteur', in *Essais critiques IV: le bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 61–7 (p. 67); 'The death of the author', in Roland

- Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1984), pp. 142–8 (p. 148).
- 13 Michel Foucault, 'Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?', in *Dits et écrits, vol. 1, 1954–1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 789–821; 'What is an author?', in James D. Faubion (ed.) *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology: Michel Foucault*, vol. 2, trans. Robert Hurley and others (London: Allen Lane, 1998), pp. 205–22.
 - 14 In this respect, see especially Luce Irigaray, *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (Paris: Minuit, 1977), pp. 122 and 133; *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); *Je, tu, nous: pour une culture de la différence* (Paris: Grasset, 1990); *Je, tu, nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin (New York and London: Routledge, 1993); and more recently 'Au-delà de tout jugement, tu es', *Sémiotiques*, 10 (June 1996); 'Beyond all judgement, you are', trans. Michael Worton, *Journal of the Institute of Romance Studies*, 7 (1999), 1–10.
 - 15 See Adrienne Rich, 'Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4) (1980), 631–60.
 - 16 See Françoise Héritier, *Masculin/Féminin: la pensée de la différence* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1996), p. 288.
 - 17 Luce Irigaray, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), p. 13; *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill (London: Athlone Press, 1993), p. 5.
 - 18 Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 119.
 - 19 Julia Kristeva, 'Entretien avec Julia Kristeva: l'avant-garde aujourd'hui', *Avant Garde*, 4 (1990), 158–75. In this interview, Kristeva does, none the less, acknowledge the short-term value of collective groups and categories. It is notable that her recent work focuses on twentieth-century women writers: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette (Julia Kristeva, *Le Génie féminin: la vie, la folie, les mots, I Hannah Arendt* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), *II Melanie Klein* (Paris: Fayard, 2000) and *III Colette* (Paris: Fayard, 2002)).
 - 20 This is not to say that *autofiction* itself is straightforward as a category. Indeed, Alex Hughes describes how celebrated practitioners of the genre Hervé Guibert and Serge Doubrovsky 'practice *autofiction* in different ways': Guibert privileging uncertainty; Doubrovsky, in psychoanalytical mode, reworking his past self (Alex Hughes, *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), n. 42, p. 162). Rather, we are concerned here with the *structuring* of processes of categorisation and the power systems in which they are implicated.
 - 21 For this expression, see Ross Mitchell Guberman (ed.), *Julia Kristeva Interviews* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 124; the interview in question was originally published in 1993 and refers to the importance of content in writing by women instead, simply, of the aesthetic or political categorisation of 'women's writing'.
 - 22 See Michael Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires, Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). Sheringham describes the heterogeneous 'hybrid form' (p. 13) of autobiography as involving: (a) interaction with other

- confessional modes of writing; (b) the borders of fact and fiction; (c) a function of the writer's materials (types of memories, stories heard and invented, past writings, archives and records); (d) 'the "missing chapter" of the unconscious' (p. 14); (e) the diversity of the contexts of its writing; (f) a 'highly intertextual character' via citations and references to reading (pp. 15–17). Autobiography is 'a patchwork assembled out of this disparateness' (p. 14), a genre characterised by 'indefinition' (p. 17). Elsewhere, Sheringham glosses: 'autobiography is no longer considered to be a generic straightjacket but a multi-faceted and essentially hybrid set of practices having in common a basis in the referential (whilst not excluding the fictive)' (Michael Sheringham, 'Women writers and the rise of autobiography', in Sonya Stephens (ed.), *A History of Women's Writing in France*, pp. 185–203). Notwithstanding the already-recognised hybrid nature of autobiography, our own point here, as in note 11, concerns the structuring principles of categorisation.
- 23 Until the publication of *L'Inceste*, Angot's texts were categorised as *roman* (novel). See Alex Hughes, "'Moi qui ai connu l'inceste, je m'appelle Christine" [I have had an incestuous relationship and my name is Christine]: writing and subjectivity in Christine Angot's incest narratives', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 2(1) (spring 2002), 65–77, which comments on the connections between Angot's work and Guibert, Doubrovsky and Stein.
 - 24 Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, trans. Richard Howard (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 175.
 - 25 See Jacques Lacan, 'The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I', in *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 1–7.
 - 26 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*, trans. Mary Dalwood (London and New York: Marion Boyars, 1987), p. 108.
 - 27 Diana E. H. Russell (ed.) *Making Violence Sexy: Feminist Views on Pornography* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1993), pp. 2–3.
 - 28 Linda LeMoncheck, *Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) p. 98.
 - 29 Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), p. 122.
 - 30 For feminist critiques of psychoanalytical and philosophical positions, see Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Hart-Davis, 1971); Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1949; repr. 1976); *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H. M. Parshley (London: Picador, [1953] 1988); Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *La Jeune Née* (Paris: 10/18 UGE, 1975); *The Newly Born Woman*, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986); Hélène Cixous, 'Le Sexe ou la tête?', *Les Cahiers du GRIF*, 13 (October 1976), 5–15; 'Castration or decapitation?', trans. Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7(1) (autumn 1981), 41–55; Shoshana Felman, *What Does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
 - 31 Felman, *What Does a Woman Want?*, p. 16.
 - 32 See, for example, the work of Charlotte Delbo, Jorge Semprun, and Hervé Guibert.

- 33 This is a wider and more common-place use of the term than that clinically identified in the context of 'post-traumatic stress disorder', which is restricted to exposure to events outside the range of normal human experience rather than to the more common experiences of bereavement, financial difficulties, marriage breakdown, etc. See Luís Quintais, 'How to speak, how to remember: post-traumatic stress disorder and the Portuguese colonial wars (1961–74)', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 1(3) (winter 2001), 85–101.
- 34 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1996), p. 168.
- 35 Suzette A. Henke, *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women's Life-Writing* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998).
- 36 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
- 37 Kathryn Robson, 'Falling into an abyss: remembering and writing sexual abuse in Béatrice de Jurquet's *La Traversée des lignes*', *Journal of Romance Studies*, 2(1) (spring 2002), 79–90. Another example of this type of reading is Colin Davis's chapter on Jorge Semprun in *French Fiction in the Mitterand Years*, pp. 61–82.
- 38 Melanie Klein, 'Mourning and its relation to manic-depressive states' (1940), in *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other works 1921–1945* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1981), pp. 344–69; Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and melancholia' (1917 [1915]), in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, Pelican Freud Library vol. 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 245–68.
- 39 Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).
- 40 Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (London: Virago, 1986).
- 41 See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 14.
- 42 Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 91.
- 43 See, for example, Christine Battersby, *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), for a philosophical approach that accommodates the relationship between feminist identity politics and the diversity between individual women; Morwenna Griffiths, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), for a philosophical rethinking of identity using the metaphor of a web.
- 44 Colin McGinn, *Ethics, Evil, and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 174–5.
- 45 Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 22.