

The Theorist's Mother



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Blind Man's Buff, 1984; Marble 36½ ×
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In memory of
Selma Blossom Cohen Parker
1926–1991
plus qu'une mère

A mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son; this is altogether the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships.

—SIGMUND FREUD, “Femininity”

The writer is someone who plays with his mother’s body . . . in order to glorify it, to embellish it, or in order to dismember it, to take it to the limit of what can be known about the body.

—ROLAND BARTHES, *The Pleasure of the Text*

Algernon: All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.

—OSCAR WILDE, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

“Why on earth should I feel called upon to write a book?” Ulrich objected. “I was born of my mother, after all, not an inkwell.”

—ROBERT MUSIL, *The Man without Qualities*

Don’t forget that it’s almost as stupid to say of a book that “It’s very intelligent” as to say “He was very fond of his mother.” But that first proposition still needs proving.

—MARCEL PROUST, *Contre Saint-Beuve*

Wystan: I am *not* your father, I’m *your* mother.

Chester: You’re *not* my mother! I’m *your* mother!

—RICHARD DAVENPORT-HINES, *Auden*

Salomé: He says terrible things about my mother, does he not!

2nd Soldier: We never understand what he says, Princess.

—OSCAR WILDE, *Salomé*

The sense I give to the name mother must be explained, and that is what will be done hereafter.

—JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *Émile*

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Preface and Acknowledgments

Here there is a kind of question, let us call it historical,
whose conception, formation, gestation and labor we are only
catching a glimpse of today.

—JACQUES DERRIDA, *Writing and Difference*

Every theorist is the child of a mother, but few have acknowledged this fact as *theoretically* significant. And why should they? Mothers, after all, may have helped to bring the philosopher into existence but not his or her philosophy. Mothers give birth and raise children but theorists think—a division of labor as old as the division of labor. That mothers work to make it possible for their philosopher-children to think never seems to affect what philosophers think, even if the language of philosophy leans heavily on maternity's imagery. We speak regularly of the birth of tragedy, say, or of the clinic, despite knowing that tragedies and clinics are neither born nor give birth. Indeed, our conception of generation "is so instinctive to us that the etymology of 'concept' goes largely unremarked."¹ We tell ourselves meanwhile that mothers, like the poor, are much too busy for theory.² Though both mothers and philosophers are educators, mothers do their work at home and not in public, teach by example rather than by argument, and are never made to stand for examinations or fulfill competency requirements of the sort that, since the nineteenth century, have made philosophy an academic profession. While women may now be philosophers, mothers qua mothers may not. And yet we theorists persist in describing our books as our children, perhaps the only time we do not derogate procreation as inferior to thought: "For anyone who looked at Homer and Hesiod and all the other great poets would envy them because of the kind of offspring they left behind them," says Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*. "They would rather be the parent of children like these, who have conferred on their progenitors immortal glory and fame, than of ordinary human children."³

Although in many ways Plato still defines how we think about thinking *and* mothers, the relationship between these terms has grown especially vexed during the past one hundred and fifty-odd

years. Some of this turmoil is recent, stemming from the uncertain implications for philosophy of the proliferation of “assisted reproduction” technologies and the new family forms these technologies have helped create. But mother trouble is already legible in the theoretical traditions associated with Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud—Michel Foucault’s twin “founders of discursivity”—given that these traditions uniquely pose the question of their own reproduction as an element of their theorization.⁴ When, for example, Jacques Lacan pillories the psychoanalytic establishment for the inorganic way that it trains its future practitioners, he has recourse to an idiom that implicates as well the afterlife of his own thought: “In order to be passed on—and not having at its disposal the law of blood that implies generation or the law of adoption that presupposes marriage—it has at its disposal only the pathway of imaginary reproduction which, through a form of facsimile analogous to printing, allows it to print, as it were, a certain number of copies whereby the one [*l’unique*] becomes plural.”⁵ But can Marxism and psychoanalysis ever count on their reproduction when the one excludes mothers from its purview and the other has eyes mainly for fathers? Do we know, already with Marx and Freud as well as after them, who or what a mother may be? Where *do* theorists come from?

All subsequent theory—including feminist and queer varieties indebted (or not) to Marx and Freud—has had to grapple with these questions, and this book explores some of their disconcerting consequences. Maternal predicaments occupy center stage in three different ways in the book’s central chapters, where the mother (dis)-appears in turn as an inassimilable body, a constitutive absence, and a foreign native tongue. Since I call philosophers to task for failing to consider their own mothers’ pertinence for thinking, chapter 1—a rereading of “the body” in Lacanian teaching—includes reflection on my mother’s form of psychosomatic pedagogy. In pondering the mother’s near-total elision from Marxist thought, chapter 2 discerns in György Lukács’s reading of Sir Walter Scott’s *Waverley* a characteristic injunction to read fiction as history’s parthenogenic child. Where the first two chapters treat Marxism and psychoanalysis separately, chapter 3 brings them together to consider what specifically in these traditions the mother can and cannot translate. At their con-

clusions all three chapters pass through the membrane that traditionally divides Writing from Life, as relations between particular mothers and sons (my own, Lukács's, and Vladimir Medem's) enact in a different register the argument that precedes them. The book's introduction and coda explore more general questions concerning the mother's troubling identity—more troubling now than ever, perhaps, when even “her” gender may defy prediction.

Truth be told, *The Theorist's Mother* is an accidental book, but no less beloved by me for that. Other books may begin at the beginning, but this one came together belatedly with the surprising discovery that I had already been writing about mothers—for years and years, in fact. Have I ever written about anything else? Why, indeed, was I the last to know? Perhaps, in structural terms, I am hardly the one to answer these questions. In any case, Julia Kristeva's description of maternity seems an apt characterization of this book's peculiar gestation—as well as of the nature of writing more generally: “‘It happens, but I'm not there.’ ‘I cannot realize it, but it goes on.’ Motherhood's impossible syllogism.”⁶ Maternity and writing will share many such traits in the chapters that follow.

A second surprise is that these pages turned out in some sense to be “about” Jacques Derrida even though his work never occupies center stage for very long. Though I anticipated devoting a concluding chapter to Derrida's abiding interest in maternity as an unmasterable question for philosophy, it soon seemed clear to me that to do full justice to this material—from *Of Grammatology* and “Khora” to *Glas* and “Circumfession”—would require a book of its own. Given that the impact of Derrida's thinking is nonetheless apparent throughout this project, I sensed that a culminating chapter on his work could also leave the impression that, here at last, is the maternal truth that eluded all of his theorist predecessors. Nothing could be further from the deconstructive point this book wants to make about maternity and teleology, or, indeed, about maternity as teleology: that the mother's identity has never been undivided, that our inability to recognize a mother when we think we see one began well before the modern advent of technologically assisted conception. We will discover in what follows that this point, moreover, is not simply Derrida's. The revital-

ized field of kinship studies, in grappling not only with the global impact of new reproductive technologies but also with sociosexual challenges to the definition of the family, will similarly conclude that there is always more than one mother. If Derrida retains some privilege here, it is in the hope that the terms he provides may help renew discussion within and between the fields of philosophy, ethnography, literary and media studies, linguistics, and feminist and queer studies—in short, in whatever remains today of Theory.

This book was inspired in a different way by the world-renowned artist Louise Bourgeois, whose *Blind Man's Buff* (1984) appears on the cover of the paperback. I read this highly tactile marble sculpture with its impossibly numerous breastlike protuberances mounted on a headless, phallic torso as a wry if unsettling take on what theorists want from their mothers. Bourgeois died in 2010 at the age of ninety-nine. Much of this book was written in the Manhattan neighborhood I “shared” with her (along with several hundred thousand others), and I am sorry not to have been able to make her a gift of it. Less tintured by the Lacanian imaginary were the recent deaths of a number of other muses—friends and interlocutors I knew in different circumstances and at different moments of our sundry lives. I can recognize some of the places where Sean Holland, Barbara Johnson, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Greta Slobin, and David Foster Wallace each left traces in the writing; perhaps others will emerge with the passage of time.

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Jersey City, May 2011

Introduction

Philosophy's Mother Trouble

. . . what is neither subject, nor object, nor figure, and which one can, provisionally and simplistically, call “the mother.”

—PHILIPPE LACOUE-LABARTHE AND JEAN-LUC NANCY,
Retreating the Political

1.

The Theorist's Mother proposes that what unifies the otherwise disparate traditions of critical theory and philosophy from Karl Marx to Jacques Derrida is their troubled relation to maternity. This is a very large claim, to be sure, and perhaps also an obvious one: has anyone ever been spared a troubled relation to maternity? Even so, “mother trouble” has not typically been recognized as a defining feature of Theory (in its familiarly capacious sense) beyond the forms of its inherence in the work of particular theorists. The mother is seldom included among the customary topoi of philosophy, even as philosophers rely heavily in their discourse on the tropes of maternity. As a synonym for “beginning,” the word *birth* appears in every conceivable context in the official histories of Western thought—except for parturition. Marx is in one respect an arbitrary origin for this project, given that he was hardly the first (nor will he be the last) to wish to do entirely without the mother. However much Sigmund Freud would have liked simply to follow suit, he invented his own procedures for making her disappear. Where Martin Heidegger assumed that *Dasein* has no gender, we may infer further that it had, for him, no mother either. Friedrich Nietzsche, Emmanuel Levinas, and Derrida were all unusual as philosophers in the explicit interest they took in maternity, though the various forms of their attention have irritated many of their feminist readers. And yet feminist philosophers and theorists have been no more immune to mother trouble than their canonical counterparts. Indeed, more than a generation after the first births by

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in vitro fertilization, we have been obliged by new developments in medical technology and by changing conceptions of kinship to think differently not only about the present and future of motherhood but also about its past. Clearly, as Jacqueline Rose has put it, thinking about mothers produces singular effects on the nature of thinking itself.¹ This book traces a number of such effects, primarily in the writings of Marx and Freud and their heirs, at a moment when philosophy and theory are confronting what may be their most perplexing challenge: a strangely queered, (im)possible maternity that—till now, at least—is not what we think. What is a mother when we cannot presuppose “her” gender? Were we ever able to?

I imagine the theorist of my title as a scholar working within and across the loose confederation of disciplines—primarily Continental philosophy, psychoanalysis, political theory, anthropology, and linguistics—that transformed literary and cultural analysis in the 1970s just as the “new reproductive technologies” began to change our understandings of conception, pregnancy, and birth. At the center of the book are the figures of Marx, Freud, György Lukács, and Jacques Lacan, with Derrida playing a significant though less direct role throughout. Heidegger, Roland Barthes, Levinas, J.-B. Pontalis, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Alain Badiou all make appearances of varying length from supporting actor to cameo, and Nietzsche plays a prominent role in the coda. This book takes up, in other words, one plausible version of “the male theory canon,” which, with few exceptions, earns its canonical status in part by not acknowledging itself *as* male.

Not to mention as maternal. One example will have to stand in here for others, many more of which will be discussed in detail in the chapters that follow. When Simon Critchley identifies as one of Continental philosophy’s defining features an emphasis on the “thoroughly *contingent* or *created* character of human experience,” we might have expected maternity—which, presumably, has something to say about the nature of contingency and creation—to count as part of that experience.² It does not. If Critchley had wanted philosophical precedent for *not* associating maternity with creativity, he could easily have turned to Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, which argued that pregnancy is merely a bodily function and, as such, inherently uncreative.³ But Critchley does not refer to that argument, or make

any other, to justify maternity's omission, which thereby goes unremarked. The absence of reflection on maternity from his discussion of the "*created* character of human experience" thus has the effect of suggesting that motherhood is a kind of *inhuman* experience, alien to the forms of conceptual generality to which philosophy properly aspires.⁴

Yet philosophers seem to have no doubt as to where philosophers come from. The following is the first of the nine "stories" presented recently by Badiou as his "philosophical biography":

My father was an alumnus of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégé* of mathematics: my mother an alumna of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégée* of French literature. I am an alumnus of the *École Normale Supérieure* and *agrégé*, but *agrégé* of what, of philosophy, that is to say, probably, the only possible way to assume the double filiation and circulate freely between the literary maternity and the mathematical paternity. This is a lesson for philosophy itself: the language of philosophy always constructs its own space between the *matheme* and the poem, between the mother and the father, after all.⁵

Badiou is not, of course, simply recounting here his own origins as a philosopher whose distinctive interests include set theory as well as the writing of fiction and drama; he is telling us the genealogy of philosophy itself as the dialectical sublation of its literary and mathematical parentage. Philosophy is thus conceived by Badiou as an only child with no rivalrous siblings or cousins, queer aunts or uncles. Badiou's next biographical installment, "about mother and philosophy," carries this theme forward:

My mother was very old and my father was not in Paris. I would take her out to eat in a restaurant. She would tell me on these occasions everything she had never told me. It was the final expressions of tenderness, which are so moving, that one has with one's very old parents. One evening, she told me that even before meeting my father, when she was teaching in Algeria, she had a passion, a gigantic passion, a devouring passion, for a philosophy teacher. This story is absolutely authentic. I listened to it, obviously, in the position you can imagine, and I said to myself: well, that's it, I have done nothing else except accomplish the desire of my mother, that the Algerian philosopher had neglected. He had gone

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off with someone else and I had done what I could to be the consolation for my mother's terrible pain—which had subsisted underneath it all even until she was eighty-one.

You may be astonished (as I certainly was the first time I encountered this passage) at the speed with which Badiou transforms his mother's tale about her attachment to a philosopher into an "absolutely authentic" story about himself. Oedipally conflating the singular with the general, Badiou never pauses to consider the possibility that, rather than saying "on these occasions everything she had never told me," his mother may have been exercising her literary license, knowing well from her experience "the position" her auditor then asks *us* to imagine him in. She may have been playing with him, in short, knowing that he would take the bait—and that he could scarcely keep himself from turning her story into his tale of philosophical inheritance, a transformation that enables him to supplant his mother as the tale's protagonist: "The nature of philosophy is that something is eternally being bequeathed to it. It has the responsibility of this bequeathal. You are always treating the bequeathal itself, always taking one more step in the determination of what was thus bequeathed to you. As myself, in the most unconscious manner, I never did anything as a philosopher except respond to an appeal that I had not even heard." I am, indeed, willing to believe that this was an appeal he had not even heard.

Even while exploring the nature of creativity and the paths of philosophical vocation, Critchley and Badiou exemplify two of the prominent ways that the mother can be made to disappear—in the first instance as the *object* of Theory, and in the second as its *subject*. Critchley's omission of the mother from a discussion of human creativity bears on the question of whether her absence is contingent or constitutive: can there be a philosophy of the mother, a philosophy that includes maternity within its disciplinary purview? Badiou's replacement of his mother as the protagonist of a story about philosophical calling raises a different question: can mothers ever be philosophers? As we will observe often in the pages to come, this second question can occur in tandem with the first, though the two retain some formal independence from each other. Throughout his corpus, for instance, Derrida repeatedly frames maternity as an ineluctable

problem for philosophy—as an incapacitation of its virile pretensions to transparent self-knowledge.⁶ And yet Derrida was clearly flummoxed when asked the following in the recent documentary film that bears his name:

Question: If you had a choice, what philosopher would you have liked to be your mother?

Derrida: . . . I have no ready answer for this question. Let me . . . give me some time. [*Five-second pause*] *My mother?* [*Laughs*] A good question, it's a good question, in fact. [*Eighteen-second pause*] It's an interesting question, I'll try to tell you why I can't . . . It's *impossible* for me to have any philosopher as a mother, that's a problem. My mother, my mother *couldn't* be a philosopher. [*Switches to French*] A philosopher *couldn't* be my mother. That's a very important point. Because the figure of the philosopher, for me, is always a masculine figure. This is one of the reasons I undertook the deconstruction of philosophy. All the deconstruction of phallogocentrism is the deconstruction of what one calls philosophy, which since its inception has always been linked to a paternal figure. So a philosopher is a father, not a mother. So the philosopher that would be my mother would be a postdeconstructive philosopher, that is, myself, or my son. My mother as a philosopher would be my granddaughter, for example. An inheritor. A woman philosopher who would reaffirm the deconstruction. And consequently, would be a woman who thinks. Not a philosopher. I always distinguish thinking from philosophy. A thinking mother—it's what I both love and try to give birth to.⁷

It is fascinating to observe Derrida struggling here to respond to a question to which he had not previously given thought (an eighteen-second pause is an eternity of screen time). In replying finally that a philosopher could never have been his mother, he seems not to be affirming the classical prejudice that *women* are unfit for philosophy. Derrida is even willing to imagine himself as a mother who gives birth to himself, to his son, and to his granddaughter—but not to his mother. Indeed, as with Badiou's biographical sketches, philosophical inheritance proceeds generationally in one direction only, and the mother never receives her due when reckoned from the vantage of her son: "My mother *couldn't* be a philosopher. [*Switches to French*] A philosopher *couldn't* be my mother." Though strikingly similar in

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their syntax, these English and French phrases suggest rather different things: the first, that being “my mother” prevents a particular person from also being a philosopher; and the second, that being a philosopher prevents any one of a class of persons from also being “my mother.” (I will soon have occasion to say more about such uses of the possessive pronoun, as well as the mother’s peculiar relation to singularity and generality.)⁸

Of course, Derrida is scarcely unique in resisting the notion of the mother as philosopher—could philosophy exist without such resistance? Surprisingly, perhaps, a number of feminist philosophers have also found philosophy and maternity to be incompatible, though for different reasons than Derrida. Motherhood, Gail Weiss suggests, may be “so comprehensive” and consuming an identity as to “rule out the ability to simultaneously possess another identity, such as intellectual.”⁹ But philosophy is demanding too, as Robyn Ferrell pointedly recalls: “It is not only that it is not possible to do philosophy while being a mother; it is also not possible to do *anything else* while doing philosophy.” As Ferrell explains,

Motherhood is that part of being a woman that is least amenable to the demands of intellectual labor. This is not because a mother cannot think—it is not a case of the old gynecologists’ lore that a woman “gives birth to her brain.” Anyone who has had the care of a child, and has done it conscientiously, knows that there is no possibility of thinking sustained thought or losing oneself in concentration—care giving as a practice is extrovert in the extreme.

Indeed, as styles of labor, maternal and intellectual labor are almost diametrically opposed: one demands extroversion and action, and is contingent on circumstances to a high degree; the other is solipsistic, autonomous, and sustained. Consequently, the fantasy of being able to write while the baby is asleep is just that.¹⁰

Ferrell’s account of the differences between intellectual and maternal labor clearly echoes Beauvoir’s still notorious distinction between genuine thought as a transcendental project and maternity as mere immanent repetitiveness. But Ferrell may have also been responding to Sara Ruddick and her own complex response to Beauvoir. Recounting the genesis of her pathbreaking book *Maternal Thinking* (1989), Ruddick described a world in which motherhood and philoso-

phy were irreconcilably at odds—the very world anatomized by *The Second Sex*:

During most of the years that I was actively taking care of my children, mothering was said to be love and feminine duty rather than a thoughtful project. It was difficult for a woman of my class and time to believe that “as a mother” she thought at all, let alone that her “maternal thinking” was of value. Moreover, I had a graduate degree in philosophy; during these years of domestic responsibility and career confusion, I clung to the fragile identity of “philosopher.” But Western philosophers had explicitly and metaphorically contrasted “rational” thinking with the kinds of particularity, passionate attachment, and bodily engagement expressed in mothering. Accordingly, “as a philosopher” I could imagine myself “thinking” only when I was not being “a mother” but was at “work”—teaching—or better still when I was trying to write about the transcendent objects and transcendental questions of philosophy.¹¹

In an effort to break the grip of this opposition, Ruddick proposed not only that mothers *think* (a radical notion, then as now) but further that they think *distinctively*: “How might a mother, a person who thinks regularly and intently about children, think about ‘the world’? What styles of cognition and perception might mothers develop? How, for example, might a mother, a person for whom maternal thinking was a significant part of her or his intellectual life, think about ‘nature,’ change, the self, and other such philosophical topics?”¹² Ruddick defined maternal thinking as a form of “practical consciousness”; she hoped that “maternal concepts,” uniquely reflecting the experience of mothers, could make their way into larger “political and philosophical discussions” about the causes of war and the possibility of nonviolence. The subject of a recent volume of commemorative essays, *Maternal Thinking* has long since become a touchstone of feminist thought, but the breach that it discerned between maternity and philosophy remains today as wide as ever:

The idea of “maternal thinking” posed questions about social construction, relativism, pragmatism, pluralism—but these are not questions posed by mothering. This is philosophy talking to itself. When you ask about mothering or motherhood inspiring philosophical reflection I think of issues of death, time passing, individuation and connection,

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love and the sorrow it includes . . . subjects I talk about in the writing I am doing now. But neither the thinking that mothers engaged in nor the thinking about maternal thinking that I was doing twenty years ago were, in my view, philosophical. I was quite insistent on that point. I suspect now that I was afraid of appearing fraudulent or foolish if I pretended that I was doing philosophy. I published “Maternal Thinking” in *Feminist Studies*. I was enormously pleased that it was accepted there. That was my chosen audience.¹³

Ruddick seems to have no interest here in claiming maternal thinking as philosophy. I do not see her making a case for “philosophy in the nursery,” or insisting, as Michèle Le Dœuff has done in a different context, that “philosophical work takes place in many more areas than that of mere professional philosophy.”¹⁴ Her concern, rather, is with an absence in feminist thought that no one had noticed before in these terms: “Neither I, nor the philosophers, feminists, and feminist psychoanalysts to whom I turned, represented mothers as thinking people. . . . feminist thinking was of limited use in forging a representation of mothers as thinkers.”¹⁵ Ruddick accounts for this absence by observing that the feminists of her generation tended to write from a daughter’s perspective and were largely antipathetic to their mothers’ concerns.¹⁶ But another explanation may derive from feminist philosophy’s claim that being a woman does not interfere with or otherwise disqualify one from pursuing philosophy. Against the crushing weight of the philosophical canon, which, to justify women’s exclusion as both subject and object, elevates culture above nature, mind above body, and logic above emotion, feminist philosophers often respond with the argument that reason has no gender—an argument that is its own proof.¹⁷ Yet if the claim is that women, like men, think with their minds and not with their bodies, then maternity can never register *philosophically* within these terms. While philosophy’s exclusion of women may be contested by appealing to the universality of reason, such an appeal would fail were it made on behalf of mothers. For maternity is *not* the universal—certainly not for men, but also (though differently) not for women. All mothers (at least until recently) are women, but all women are not mothers, and the destabilizing, asymmetric difference between the two—neither simply a potential common to all women nor a synecdochic part of a

putative feminine whole—is enough to confound the project of maternal philosophy.¹⁸ Moreover, unlike being a woman, being a mother *does* interfere with or otherwise disqualify one from the practice of philosophy, as Ferrell, among others, has suggested. Whatever else Ruddick intended in developing her notion of maternal thinking, she was not asserting a right to philosophize *as a mother*.¹⁹

In contrast to philosophy proper, which typically consigns maternity to its margins, feminist theory has understood this tension between woman and mother to be central and irreducible. In fact, latecomers to the field may wrongly conclude that motherhood has always been its exclusive preoccupation. The first of several special issues published by the journal *Hypatia* on motherhood as a feminist problem dates only from 1986.²⁰ By 1992 Ann Snitow could describe emerging “from a bout of reading, a wide eclectic sampling of what this wave of US feminism has had to say about motherhood,” her own reader sensing the enormity of the task she had just completed.²¹ Eight years later, needing now to limit her survey to one decade, Terry Arendell observed matter-of-factly that “mothering and motherhood are the objects of a rapidly expanding body of literature.”²² To say the least. It thus is shocking to recall Susan Griffin’s words from 1974: “On this subject—Feminism and Motherhood—very little has been written. . . . I don’t have a feminist theory of motherhood.”²³ Ten years after publishing *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich explained that “at the time I began it, in 1972, some four or five years into a new politicization of women, there was virtually nothing being written on motherhood as an issue.”²⁴ At issue then for feminism was not maternity but its *prevention* as a basic right for women.²⁵ The chapter from *The Second Sex* entitled “The Mother” thus began with a lengthy discussion of abortion and contraception:

Contraception and legal abortion would permit woman to take her maternities in freedom. As things are, women’s fecundity is decided in part voluntarily, in part by chance. Since artificial insemination has not come into common use at present, it may happen that a woman desires maternity without getting her wish—because she lacks contact with men, or because she is herself unable to conceive. And on the other hand, a woman often finds herself compelled to reproduce against her will.²⁶

Paradoxically, second-wave feminism's very efforts to distinguish femininity from maternity helped to facilitate in the late 1970s a surge of feminist scholarship on motherhood and mothering that quickly turned into a deluge. Dorothy Dinnerstein's *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* (1976), Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), and Michele Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (1979) all questioned why women persisted as mothers even while affirming maternity as a woman's choice.²⁷ Chodorow's writing in particular kindled a new interest in maternally oriented object relations within psychoanalytic theory, which helped in turn to make the mother/daughter experience, perennially scanted by Freud, a major preoccupation for feminist critics.²⁸

A decade later, Judith Butler could criticize such work—which now occupied “a hegemonic position within the emerging canon of feminist theory”—for ideologically reinforcing “the binary, heterosexist framework that carves up genders into masculine and feminine and forecloses an adequate description of the kinds of subversive and parodic convergences that characterize gay and lesbian cultures.”²⁹ Teresa de Lauretis was even more emphatic: the supposition of a “maternal imaginary” common to all women reduces “female sexuality to maternity, and feminine identity to the mother,” thereby rendering politically invisible lesbian and other nonprocreative sexualities.³⁰ Lesbian antipathy to the presumptive heterosexism of “maternal discourse” began to lessen in the mid- and late 1990s with the wider availability of assisted reproduction and the reality of procreation without sex.³¹ Meanwhile, many of those whose views about maternity had become “hegemonic” began to change their minds—seemingly in all directions. “By giving birth,” Julia Kristeva argued in an early essay, “the woman enters into contact with her mother; she becomes, she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself.”³² But in her later, more traditionally psychoanalytic work, Kristeva stressed the mother's *discontinuity* with her offspring: “For man and for woman the loss of the mother is a biological and psychic necessity, the first step on the way to becoming autonomous. Matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non condition of our individuation.”³³ Luce Irigaray's writings on the maternal oscillate in the opposite direction than Kristeva's—from an early emphasis on

the chilly structural distance separating mother and daughter (“With your milk, Mother, I swallowed ice. And here I am now, my insides frozen”) to the later “discovery” that “we are always mothers just by being women.”³⁴ To observe such swings in alignment between woman and mother not only throughout second-wave theory but also in the careers of individual theorists is to recognize the maternal as both constitutive and destabilizing for feminist thought. The questions Snitow posed in her essay of 1992 remain today every bit as politically urgent—and just as undecidable: “Women have incorporated a great deal into their mothering, but one question for feminism should surely be: Do we want this presently capacious identity, mother, to expand or to contract? How special do we want mothering to be? In other words, what does feminism gain by the privileging of motherhood?”³⁵

2.

Though not for lack of trying, the mother’s destabilizing influence cannot be diminished through more precise definition; “her” resistance to univocal meaning suggests the opposite, in fact. Discussions of motherhood across the humanities, social sciences, and medical sciences often deliberately ask “what is a mother?”—a sign that the question is not as simple as it first may appear.³⁶ This question has always been complex—kinship theory has long recognized that “mater” and “genetrix” are analytically distinct categories—but more recently the mother’s definition has passed from the complicated to the “impossible.”³⁷ To ask “what is a . . . ?” is to inquire about the sense of a word—in Saussurean terms, about its function as a differential element within a closed lexical system. In this instance, *mother* is a kinship term whose sense is produced contrastively with respect to gender (= not father) and generation (= not child). On the other hand, to ask “*who* is a mother?” is to inquire extralinguistically about a word’s referent, to wonder about the identity of a person. As will be noted frequently throughout this book, the relationship between sense and referent has never been straightforward where the mother is concerned. Indeed, their noncoincidence prepares the way not only

for adoption, wet-nursing, and step-relations but for tragedy (*Oedipus Rex*) and comedy (*Tom Jones*) as well.

During the past several decades, however, the maternal “what” and “who” have undergone a kind of crisis unlike any experienced before. Today we tend to ask *both* who *and* what the mother is—often in consecutive sentences, as in the following two examples—hopeful that doing so may increase our chance of encountering a meaning (or a person) whose distinctness (or palpability) has somehow become elusive:

Of whom do we speak when we speak of mothers and what do we denote when we refer to mothering, motherhood, maternal subjectivity, or the maternal more generally? What have the contours of these terms come to signify across different disciplinary domains, what are their genealogies, and where now may “a mother” begin and end?³⁸

What is a mother? Who is the mother of a child when one woman provides the ovum for fertilization and another carries the baby to term?³⁹

The difficulty here may be that the mother—as usual, overextended—now covers so much semantic territory as to defeat any expectation of lexical cohesion:

It is generally accepted that the maternal refers not only to the material and embodied experience of pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, but also to identities and meanings of mothering, the ongoing emotional and relational work of being with children and others, the daily material practices of childrearing, the social locations and structural contexts within which women mother: indeed, to the whole range of embodied, social and cultural meanings, practices and structures associated with reproduction and parenting.⁴⁰

Scholars have attempted to constrain this polysemia of “meanings, practices, and structures” by filtering it through a series of binary oppositions; we will often find “mother” contrasted with “mothering” as an identity is said to differ from a practice, or as an impersonal institution stands to an individual’s experience.⁴¹ But the current crisis of maternal sense and reference seems to resist such strategies:

For instance, it is evident that the identity of “mother” varies widely within and across cultures and time periods, as well as in different reli-

gious, social, and political contexts. Even if to be a mother, at the most minimal level, means to be a pubescent or post-pubescent female and to have and/or raise a child, this “bare” meaning is never all that is implied in a given society’s or a given individual’s respective understandings of this particular identity. Moreover, even this minimal definition is problematic because it is possible for a male-to-female transsexual to be a mother even though she isn’t born female, and so this biologically based definition excludes some people who might identify themselves and/or be identified by others as mothers. The meaning of being a mother is never just a matter of a “bare” definition in any case, since how any given individual understands the term is clearly influenced by the experience of being (or failing to be) mothered, having close (or distant) relations with mothers, social understandings of what it means to be a mother, and/or being a mother oneself.⁴²

It is surely no accident that the very project of maternal definition is abandoned in this passage just at the point where the gender of the referent comes into question. Indeed, however complex the sense and reference of maternity may once have been, medical innovation has been producing of late unprecedented forms of lexical complexity—and Theory (of all kinds, feminist and queer included) has yet to catch up. As the anthropologist Janet Carsten has observed, “fundamental assumptions about familial connection” may have fallen permanently to the wayside since the introduction of “fertility treatments, genetic testing, posthumous conception, cloning, and the mapping of the human genome.”⁴³ Many of these developments are not specific to the mother, and some concern only the father:

Artificial insemination by donor produces a clear distinction between the genetic father and the social father. Depending on the exact circumstances, *in vitro* fertilization might produce a situation in which neither social parent is the genetic parent (if both sperm and eggs are donated) or only one of them is (if there is only one donation). Surrogate motherhood can lead to an even more complicated situation, in which the social mother (that is, the commissioning mother) is one individual, the provider of the egg another, and the carrying mother a third. In addition, of course, the semen may be donated rather than coming from the social or commissioning father, involving five persons altogether.⁴⁴

But the mother has received most of the publicity—scholarly and popular, lurid and dispassionate—in this age of technologically assisted reproduction. If a crisis exists today it concerns motherhood, not fatherhood: “A crisis precipitated to a great degree by the unforeseen destabilization of maternity and motherhood that we are witnessing in the early years of the twenty-first century. . . . What meaning do we make of the split between social, biological, and genetic mothers? How do we understand the spectrum from egg donors to surrogate, lesbian, adoptive, birth, and foster mothers? How does the distinction between bio- and non-biomoms come to have meaning?”⁴⁵ With maternal reference now fracturing along each of these bio-socio-legal dimensions, the identity of the mother cannot be disclosed through an act of perception, as we have long believed it must be. Whence the crisis—which, beyond the nature of maternity, concerns the evidentiary status of the senses. Where paternity in the West has traditionally been open to question, a matter of inference rather than observation, maternity has just as traditionally figured certitude itself: “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” in Hortense Spillers’s memorable phrase.⁴⁶ We think we know a mother when we see one, but the father’s identity requires an interpretive judgment.⁴⁷ Freud tirelessly reiterated this distinction between maternity and paternity, which he considered foundational not only for psychoanalysis but for civilization itself on its long march from matriarchy to patriarchy:

When the child realizes that “*pater semper incertus est*,” while the mother is *certissima*, the family romance undergoes a curious curtailment: it contents itself with exalting the child’s father, but no longer casts any doubts on his maternal origin, which is regarded as something unalterable.⁴⁸

As Lichtenberg says, “An astronomer knows whether the moon is inhabited or not with about as much certainty as he knows who was his father, but not with so much certainly as he knows who was his mother.” A great advance was made in civilization when men decided to put their inferences upon a level with the testimony of their senses and to make the step from matriarchy to patriarchy.⁴⁹

But this turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality—that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while pater-

nity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss [*sic*]. Taking sides in this way with a thought-process in preference to a sense perception has proved to be a momentous step.⁵⁰

We know better today, perhaps, why Freud's distinction between observation and contemplation is itself a tendentious "taking of sides." In a series of essays and interviews from the 1990s, Derrida suggested that the new reproductive technologies, by undermining maternity's grounding in sense perception, have compromised the terms of Freud's argument. But those same terms, Derrida added, have always been compromised, appearances indeed notwithstanding. If we can no longer identify a mother by sight—if a mother is now always potentially one of several people—then we may not be experiencing a crisis of maternity so much as recognizing one of its structural conditions:

Today less than ever can we be sure that the mother herself is the woman we believe we saw giving birth. The mother is not only the genetrix since, as psychoanalysis (and not only psychoanalysis) has always taught us, another person can become or can have been "the" mother, one of the mothers. Now the most difficult thing to think, and first of all to desire, then to accept otherwise than as a monstrosity, is precisely this: more than one mother. Supplements of mothers, in an irreducible plurality. Today, the surrogate mother and the one who, properly speaking (as we improperly say), becomes the mother—that makes two people. Not to mention all the other mothers who step in to take over at different times. In other words, the identity of the mother (like her possible juridical identification) depends on a judgment that is just derived, and on an inference that is just as divorced from all immediate perception, as this "legal fiction" of a paternity conjectured through reason (to use a phrase from Joyce's *Ulysses* referring to paternity).⁵¹

For Derrida, the mother's "irreducible plurality" is, on the one hand, a relatively recent phenomenon, a singular event that has altered the ways we think about kinship, gender, sexuality, healthcare, capital, religion, the public, and the state. On the other hand, the structural possibility that the mother is more than one has altered our relation to the past (including our conception of what counts as an event) in enabling the recognition that the mother, in fact, has never been per-

ceivable: “And when we realize that motherhood is not simply a matter of perception, we realize that it has never been so. The mother has always been a matter of interpretation, of social construction.”⁵² Pace Freud’s commonsense insistence that “no one possesses more than one mother,” Derrida claims that to be a mother is hence structurally—ineluctably—to be more than one, and what is truly news about this recognition is that it never should have been news: “Techno-scientific capabilities (artificial insemination, surrogate mothers, cloning, etc.) will no doubt accelerate a mutation in the father/mother relation in the future. But this will only be an acceleration, a differance, however spectacular or dreadful their effects may appear: the ‘mother,’ too, has always been a ‘symbolic’ or ‘substitutable’ mother, like the father, and the certainty acquired at the moment of giving birth was in my opinion an illusion.”⁵³ Which suggests that, for Derrida, maternity also is a “legal fiction” and has always already been so:

If today the unicity of the mother is no longer the sensible object of a perceptual certitude, if maternities do not transport us beyond the surrogate mother [*ne se réduisent plus à la portée de la mère porteuse*], if there can be, as it were, more than one mother [*plus d’une mère*], if “the” mother is the object of calculation and supposition, of projection and phantasm, if the “womb” is no longer outside all phantasm, the assured place of birth, this “new” situation simply illuminates in return an ageless truth. The mother was never only, never uniquely, never indubitably the one who gives birth—and whom one sees, with one’s own eyes, give birth.⁵⁴

Though Derrida’s comments on the mother’s plurality were occasional rather than systematically developed, they can take us far toward an appreciation of why maternity has been and remains a source of trouble for Theory—above all by confounding that notion of source. One consequence is that nobody will have ever seen a mother if the act of perception has always been structured by the possibility that the person viewed as “mother” is not the only one with a claim to maternity. This possibility defines the structure of maternity as such: the mother is, was, and will be “plus d’une mère”—not one, no longer one, more than one. In this sense, Sarah Kofman’s childhood experience of multiple mothers would reflect maternity’s rule rather than exception.⁵⁵ This rule would suggest, for example, that Adriana

Cavarero seriously undercounts the number of people structurally implicated in the act of giving birth when emphasizing that “in birth one is not alone but in a duo: the mother and the one who is born.”⁵⁶ Insofar as we persist in speaking of “the mother” in the singular—“Allow me to take the mother’s side,” writes Kristeva, as if there is just one—Theory will find itself outpaced by a possibility of plurality that, paradoxically, has always defined the structure of maternity.⁵⁷

A second consequence: if the mother is not a perception but an assumption or projection, then “she” cannot serve as “the last term of a regression,” as meaning’s ultimate bedrock.⁵⁸ Originally self-divided, maternity cannot ground any other account of origin—even (or especially) that of sexual difference. As will be noted at many points in the following chapters, this consequence will affect every version of history that conceives of itself as a genealogy (and which history does not?). It also will suggest why a revised ethics of motherhood, instead of seeking to protect or to recover the mother’s identity, subjectivity, agency, or voice, will ask what it was that we thought we wanted from “her,” and why.⁵⁹

A third consequence: multiple from the outset, the mother exceeds her traditionally derogated role as the father’s counterpart, unsettling the binary logic modeled on their relationship.⁶⁰ As a venerable nickname for *differance*, the mother (in Geoffrey Bennington’s account) is “not in *opposition* to the father just as writing is not in *opposition* to voice”:

What was at stake in the thought of writing was not to rehabilitate writing in the common sense, but to see writing already at work in the voice: so that the point is not to promote a matriarchal power against a patriarchy, but to show that what has already been understood by “father” (or even by “power”) is constituted only on the basis of an anteriority which can be called “mother” solely on condition of not confusing it with the habitual conception of mother.⁶¹

“As” this radical anteriority, the mother is neither subject nor object, not a person but rather (a) text that resists univocal definition less as a result of polysemic richness than of an unlimited capacity for dissemination—for “producing a nonfinite number of semantic effects [that] can be lead back neither to a present of simple origin . . . nor to an eschatological presence.”⁶² Aperceptual, non-self-identical, and

highly allergic to the logic of the couple, this mother is never simply Theory's mother, however much it wants or claims to know "her." Indeed, despite the mother's centrality to a wide range of disciplines and interdisciplines—despite what Lisa Baraitser describes as "the vast and expanding research field of maternal practice, maternal relations, maternal embodiment and maternal representation, on the new technologies of birth and reproduction and their implications for women, and on the current rapid rate of change that family structures and parenting patterns are undergoing"—the mother troubles knowledge not simply by eluding its grasp (as if external to it) but by keeping knowledge from ever coinciding with itself.⁶³

3.

With these consequences in mind, we will find the mother causing trouble along a number of conceptual axes not only in the materials considered in this book but everywhere "she" may be used, mentioned, or otherwise put to work theoretically. Which, indeed, is everywhere. In the first place, the mother is often invoked to regulate the distinction between the literal and the figural, a distinction that she undermines nonetheless and just as frequently. We speak regularly, for example, of "the literal birth act," "birth in its literality," and "the literal act of parturition"; we contrast "literal mothers" with "other women who function as surrogates."⁶⁴ We also insist that "maternity is not just a metaphor," and that it does not "refer in any simple way to the literal moment of giving birth," but it is the act of reference which can never be simple once the mother's identity is structurally uncertain.⁶⁵ Whenever canonical philosophy makes "more than a passing reference to birth," it does so catachrestically in casting parturition as "a metaphorical process of artistic or intellectual creation which is implicitly or explicitly coded as masculine."⁶⁶ And yet the mother is also the preeminent figure of the figural. Lynne Huffer thus distinguishes the "real mother" from "the mother as a powerful cultural symbol, a symbol so powerful that it shapes the dominant structures of Western thought. . . . In the Western tradition the mother is a symbol of beginnings; as the one who gives birth, she occupies the

place of the origin. Metaphorically speaking, everything begins with the mother.”⁶⁷ The mother-as-trope is so pervasive geographically and transhistorically—“the deep surrogacy of the sign ‘mother’” so bottomless—that it may be impossible to recall the figure to anything like literality as a check against its possible (probable!) ideological abuse.⁶⁸ The mother of all metaphors is, of course, the maternal metaphor. As is the reverse.

Which suggests that, impossibly literal *and* figural, the mother may in fact be simply neither—or rather that maternity suspends our ability to discern the difference between the two. For if metaphor works by projecting the known qualities of the vehicle onto the unknown qualities of the tenor, this process loses its clarity when (“plus d’une mère”) the maternal vehicle may always be unknown, thereby confounding itself with its tenor. How then can we distinguish between the literal and the metaphorical when “the mother” already may be both? The “port” of *mère porteuse* has the same root as metaphor’s transport of sense. Freud may have learned this etymological lesson while chasing down another root:

And, speaking of wood, it is hard to understand how that material came to represent what is maternal and female. But here comparative philology may come to our help. Our German word *Holz* seems to come from the same root as the Greek ὕλη [*hulē*], meaning “stuff” “raw material.” This seems to be an instance of the not uncommon event of the general name of a material eventually coming to be reserved for some particular material. Now there is an island in the Atlantic named “Madeira.” This name was given to it by the Portuguese when they discovered it, because at that time it was covered all over with woods. For in the Portuguese language *madeira* means “wood.” You will notice, however, that *madeira* is only a slightly modified form of the Latin word *materia* which once more means “material” in general. But “*materia*” is derived from *mater* “mother”: the material out of which anything is made is, as it were, a mother to it [*ist gleichsam sein mütterlicher Anteil*]. This ancient view of the thing survives, therefore, in the symbolic use of wood for “woman” or “mother.”⁶⁹

“As it were, a mother to it”: that *gleichsam* “is” *mütterlich* seems to be all that holds together this unlikely proof of the archaic connection

between mothers and . . . wood. Even as Freud translates doubtfully from term to term and from German to Portuguese to Latin, “mother” has been all along—tautologically—vehicle as well as tenor.

Levinas provides an even more impacted example of the instability of the literal/figural relation. In his late work *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas suggests that the maternal body—at once host and hostage to an internal Other—is the universal model for ethical responsibility regardless of a person’s gender:

The one-for-the-other has the form of sensibility or vulnerability, pure passivity or susceptibility, passive to the point of becoming an inspiration, that is, alterity in the same, the trope of the body animated by the soul, psyche in the form of a hand that gives even the bread taken from its own mouth. Here the psyche is the maternal body [*Psychisme comme un corps maternel*].

In proximity the absolutely other, the stranger whom I have “neither conceived nor given birth to,” I already have on my arms, already hear, according to the Biblical formula, “in my breast as the nurse bears the nursling [*dans mon sein comme le nourricier porte le nourrisson*].” He has no other place, is not autochthonous, is uprooted, without a country, not an inhabitant, exposed to the cold and the heat of the seasons. To be reduced to having recourse to me is the homelessness or strangeness of the neighbor. It is incumbent on me.⁷⁰

Since the mother’s gender would appear to be at stake in this passage, Levinas’s readers have been eager to know whether maternity is to be understood here literally or figuratively. Stella Sandford, for example, seems especially anxious as to which of these mothers is which:

In a sense, the choice of the metaphor of maternity is an obvious one for Levinas. At the beginning of chapter 2, “the knot of subjectivity” is described as “the torsion of the Same and the Other . . . Intrigue of the Other-in-the-Same,” which is or which accomplishes itself in proximity. More simply, “subjectivity is the Other-in-the-Same,” and given these explanations, it is not difficult to see, in a rather literal way, how prenatal maternity could become the paradigm case of “the Other in the Same,” or of passive (and perhaps unchosen) responsibility. References to “the gestation of the other in the same,” used metaphorically but also as a description of maternity, reinforce such an interpretation. . . . Further-

more, the metaphor of maternity connects with, or is the archetype of, the idea of nourishment already introduced through the theme of mouth and bread. Again, pre- and postnatal maternity can provide very literal examples of nourishing the other with food that one has enjoyed, but maternity also carries the conventional symbolic signification attached, for example, to the figure of Demeter.⁷¹

Though “obvious” and employed in “a very literal way” as a model for the care of the internalized Other, maternity in Sandford’s reading is also a metaphor with respect to its “conventional symbolic signification.” But motherhood as ethical relation is as applicable to men as to women, which suggests finally, for Sandford, that Levinas “has confused the distinction between the literal and the metaphorical almost beyond repair.”⁷² Yet Levinas may have gone considerably beyond that point. Lisa Guenther recalls that the “Biblical formula” cited by Levinas is Numbers (11:12), where Moses complains to God about the Hebrews’ constant complaining: “Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? Why do you tell me to carry them in my arms, as a nurse carries an infant, to the land you promised on oath to their forefathers?” We grasp here that Moses *is* their mother, that he *did* give his people birth, even if the King James version prefers to think of him instead as “a nursing father [who] beareth the sucking child.” But Guenther does not similarly shy away from the implications of the passage and from what Levinas may have implied in citing it: “The maternity of Moses and of God suggests that one is not born, but rather becomes like a mother. The biological fact of incarnation in a female body need not condemn me to a destiny of child-birth, nor does incarnation in a male body free me from the responsibility of bearing the Other ‘like a maternal body.’ If the literal and metaphorical dimensions of birth fail to remain separate here, then perhaps it is because the story of Moses disrupts the possibility of a strictly literal or metaphorical interpretation.”⁷³ Indeed, in suggesting that the literal/figural distinction is impertinent if maternity is to function universally as an ethical injunction, Levinas broaches the question of male maternity that the present book will consider again in the coda.

Like the literal/figural distinction, the relation between singularity and generality is an especially rich node of mother trouble. Drawing

on Hannah Arendt's conception of natality as a counterweight to Heidegger's being-toward-death, Cavarero understands birth not only as a singular event but as the very incarnation of singularity: "The first setting in which uniqueness and community meet each other is that of birth. Here the existent is found in its incarnated consciousness: this boy, this girl. The aspect of the community, on the other hand, is presupposed in the fact that this singular comes into the world, from the start, from and with another existent: the mother, this mother."⁷⁴ Cavarero's emphasis on "the mother, this mother" recalls Barthes's poignant distinction between the category "mother" and the person of his mother, whom he had recently lost: "And no more would I reduce my family to the Family, would I reduce my mother to the Mother. . . . For what I have lost is not a Figure (the Mother), but a being; and not a being but a quality (a soul); not the indispensable, but the irreplaceable. I could live without the Mother (as we all do, sooner or later); but what life remained would be absolutely and entirely unqualifiable (without quality)."⁷⁵

For Cavarero as for Barthes, the mother's singularity can only be gestured at in writing; each resorts to repeated deixis and typographical convention in an effort to convey what exceeds writing's necessary generality. Indeed, Barthes famously declined reproducing in *Camera Lucida* the photographic image of his mother as a young girl, an image that he took to embody the essence of photography; to publish the photograph would have been to make the singular loss of his mother into the general Loss of the Mother. And yet, notes Derrida, this is what transpires in any case, in so far as the loss registers legibly for us as loss: "How else could we, without knowing her, be so deeply moved by what he said about his mother, who was not only the Mother, or a mother, but the only one she was and of whom such a photo was taken 'on that day'? How could this be poignant to us if a metonymic force, which yet cannot be mistaken for something that facilitates the movement of identification, were not at work?"⁷⁶ This "metonymic force" binds the Mother to the mother, publicity to privacy, generality to singularity. If each of us can say "*my* mother," then the mother is precisely never only mine. Perhaps this is what Freud's patient replied in protest when Freud insisted that he was dreaming of his mother: "It was *not* my mother," Freud recorded, convinced

of his patient's denegation, but the emphasis in this sentence could easily have fallen on the *my* had Freud had the ears to entertain that possibility.⁷⁷

The mother's uniqueness is similarly at stake in Pontalis's witty "Ersatz," a part of his collection of brief meditations on psychoanalytic terms:

For those who knew the Occupation, *Ersatz* is rutabaga, margarine, Marmite, gasogene . . . Go ahead complain, it's better than nothing! Sinister Ersatz that the vanquished must be happy with. Ersatz due to defeat, humiliation, shame. The conqueror, the occupier gets hold of the goods, the food, our lives. He steals what we were thinking belonged to us—it goes without saying that it belonged to us—, and bestows on us some substitute products. What are we to him, if not the *Ersatz* of humankind?

On this, I won't budge: that is *Ersatz*.

Then Michel Gribinski reminds me that the word is found in Freud and doesn't always have the negative connotation that I give to it. He goes even further and claims that we are never dealing with anything besides *Ersatz*. I protest, refuse to let myself be convinced, particularly because the demonstration is convincing.

I admit that our images are substitutes for presence. I have a hard time accepting the idea that throughout our lives we keep finding father substitutes who wouldn't be less than our own fathers.

But are there mother substitutes? As unsatisfying as she had been, she was the only one. I tell myself that the only being who has no substitute, still less is interchangeable, who is perhaps immortal, is the (if not our) Mother, and I capitalize, I attribute a capital letter, to my tiny Mother.⁷⁸

Artfully composed, "Ersatz" has the figural concision of a prose poem. It may take several readings until the realization sinks in that the territory described in its first paragraph is (also) the body of the mother, whose occupation by the father has expelled us into a world of imitative, second-rate pleasures. The admission that nothing, ultimately, distinguishes fathers from father substitutes would be the price happily paid by this narrator to defend the mother against any similar duplication—were it not for the fact that the very attribution of her uniqueness requires a capital letter that makes the mother everyone's in making her mine.⁷⁹

A third kind of mother trouble erupts at the border between a theorist's life and writing. The life of a philosopher is usually thought to be extrinsic to the work because it embodies particularities foreign to the work's transcendental truths. The theorist's biography thus has no *philosophical* use or pertinence, at least as customarily understood. If we nonetheless retain an interest in theorists' lives, it tends to take the form of what Derrida described facetiously as "biographical novels" (he lists, among their many varieties, "the 'writer and his mother' series"), which suppose that "by following empirical procedures of the psychologistic—at times even psychoanalytic—historicist or sociological type, one can give an account of the genesis of the system."⁸⁰ But the border between life and work proves to be far less tractable than such procedures promise, and this will be especially the case in *The Theorist's Mother*, where the double genitive of the title positions the mother simultaneously inside and outside the theorist's work—inside as a philosopheme and outside as part of the theorist's life. These two mothers ("plus d'une mère" once again) often seem to communicate with each other, troubling in doing so our capacity to differentiate the immanent from the extrinsic, the necessary from the accidental.⁸¹ We could ask, for example, whether Jean-Paul Sartre's mother Anne-Marie (who considered the happy years she lived with her son as her *troisième mariage*) left any traces in his philosophical work.⁸² We could wonder, too, about Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's frequent references to her mother in her many interviews and occasional writings—what functions might these moments possess beyond the "merely" anecdotal?⁸³

Heidegger and his mother might offer us the most intriguing example to consider in this connection, since we know very little about Johanna Kempf Heidegger other than that she was pained by her son's growing irreligiosity. We know that when she died in 1927 Heidegger placed "an author's copy of the new published book [*Being and Time*] on his mother's deathbed," though none of his biographers has interpreted this act in any but the most admiring of ways.⁸⁴ We know, too, that maternity has never been one of his central preoccupations—in fact, he somehow managed not to take any notice of Augustine's mother Monica in his detailed reading of the *Confessions*.⁸⁵ What then should we make of the following (near the beginning of the fifth lecture of *What Is Called Thinking?*):

“You just wait—I’ll teach you what we call obedience!” a mother might say to her boy who won’t come home [*Warte, ich werde dich lehren, was gehorchen heißt*—*ruft die Mutter ihrem Buben nach, der nicht nach Hause will*]. Does she promise him a definition of obedience? No. Or is she going to give him a lecture? No again, if she is a proper mother [*Auch nicht, falls sie eine rechte Mutter ist*]. Rather, she will convey to him what obedience is [*Sie wird vielmehr dem Sohn das Gehorchen beibringen*]. Or better, the other way around: she will bring him to obey.⁸⁶

Since Heidegger’s writing is hardly famous for its representations of speech, we may wonder whether Heidegger himself had ever heard such a mother. This mother in any case takes center stage for once in philosophy, bringing her son to obey her command to return home (which is never a neutral word for Heidegger). But she does this, it seems, nonverbally, and not by defining her terms in advance or by lecturing.⁸⁷ These latter are the activities of a philosopher, and if she is a proper mother (*eine rechte Mutter*) she will leave those activities to others—perhaps to her son. But also to Nietzsche, whose unique manner of writing Heidegger turns to in the remainder of his lecture. Nietzsche, unlike a proper mother, did raise his voice: he “endured the agony of having to scream.” But that dimension may be all that distinguishes a mother who transgresses the stage of philosophy from a philosopher who takes *himself* as his mother: “To put it in the form of a riddle, as my father I have already died, as my mother I am still alive and growing old.”⁸⁸

These three kinds of mother trouble—literal/figural, singular/general, life/work—will recur frequently in the following chapters, which commonly explore a further problem inherent to the practice of Theory: how to reproduce itself. I focus primarily on Marx and Freud, who, according to Foucault, “are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts.”⁸⁹ As so-called founders of discursivity, Marx and Freud uniquely constrain their would-be heirs to “return to the origin”—to an engagement with the founders’ texts—if this subsequent work is to count as a part of Marxist or Freudian tradition. “This return, which is part of the discursive field itself, never stops modifying it,” Foucault added: “The return is not a historical supplement that would be added to the

discursivity, or merely an ornament; on the contrary, it constitutes an effective and necessary task of transforming the discursive practice itself.”⁹⁰

This book puts many such “returns” on display: Lacan, famous for his “return to Freud,” returns in chapter 1 to his own earlier work when he finds himself being read by others; Lukács returns to Marx in chapter 2 by reading Sir Walter Scott, Marx’s favorite English-language novelist; new translations of Marx and Freud return us in chapter 3 not only to the texts of their originals but to previous translations of Marx and Freud. Each of these returns makes a place for later theorists by establishing new relations to the texts of a founder—precisely the process Foucault described in “What Is an Author?” But what Foucault neglected to emphasize is that such place-making inevitably turns Theory’s history into a form of genealogy, an exchange between fathers and sons (and today, increasingly, daughters as well). Which means that the mother must somehow be involved in this family affair, even if (as in Marxism) she seems wholly absent, and even if (as in psychoanalysis) her contributions are discounted. While Theory may be incapable of imagining its past and its future other than in these procreative terms, it seems equally unable to imagine the mother as having much if anything to do with its own replication.⁹¹

Mothers do not take well to this treatment, needless to say. Lacanian pedagogy will founder on the mother’s resistance to the model of somatic conversion. Scott’s *Waverley* will show Lukács’s sublation of the novel to be a fiction of reproduction. A new translation of Freud’s book on jokes will help us understand why revolution for Marx requires the forgetting of the mother tongue—a forgetting we may not be fated to repeat.

I conclude with a brief coda that projects a different future for the theorist’s mother, one that may already have arrived. “Other Maternities” briefly canvases the history of male writers portraying themselves as the mother of their literary and philosophical offspring. Feminist critics have decried this long-standing practice, calling out Nietzsche in particular but also Honoré de Balzac and many others for their “gyno-colonial” appropriation of maternity. But this critique assumes that women’s maternity is not similarly an appropriation. It

also assumes that men cannot give birth, which, *strictu sensu*, is no longer the case. On the brink of this brave new world, where biology is proving itself at least as plastic as culture, Shulamith Firestone's *Dialectic of Sex*, long rebarbative to many, has become newly readable in unexpected ways. What will become of Theory when we cannot presume its mother's gender?

Preface

1. Sacks, *Shakespeare's Images of Pregnancy*, 1.
2. See Andrew Parker, "Introduction: Mimesis and the Division of Labor," in Rancière, *The Philosopher and His Poor*, ix–xx.
3. Plato, *The Symposium*, 47 (209c–d).
4. See Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?," in *The Essential Works of Foucault*, 2:217.
5. Jacques Lacan, "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," in *Écrits*, 397–98.
6. Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 237.

Introduction

1. Rose, "On Knowledge and Mothers: On the Work of Christopher Bollas," in *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, 151.
2. Critchley, *Continental Philosophy*, 62. On the difficulty of representing the history of an *absence* of representation (of "woman," paradigmatically, but perhaps also of "mother"), see Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference*, esp. 26–30.
3. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 63, 496.
4. Feminist theorists grasped this point long ago, under the sign of irony. See, for example, Russo, *The Female Grotesque*; and Zwinger, "Blood Relations."
5. Badiou, "Philosophy as Biography." This is the text of a talk delivered at the Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York City on 13 November 2007. All quotations are taken from this source.
6. Among other texts by Derrida on the mother as limit, see *Of Grammatology*; *Glas*; and "Circumfession" in Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*.
7. Dick and Kofman, *Derrida*, soundtrack quoted from 64:58 to 67:05.
8. Elsewhere, complaining that Barbara Johnson turned what he had taught her back against him, Derrida adopted the persona (if this is the right term) of an aggrieved mother: "Unbeatable, I tell you: nothing to say against this plenitude, however gross it may be, since she was full *only* of all of you, *already*, and everything that all of you would have to say against it. This is what I call in English the logic of *pregnancy* and in French the fore-

closure of the name of the mother. In other words, you are all born, don't forget, and you can write only against your mother who bore within her along with you, what she has borne you to write against her, your writing with which she would be large. And full, you will never get out of it. Ah! but against whom had I written? — I would like it to have been your mother. And she above all. — Who?" ("Envois," in *The Post Card*, 150). Whatever we make of "Envois," whose referential status is anything but certain, it seems safe to say that Derrida rarely if ever *invited* his readers to treat him maternally. In this respect, at least, he may remind us of Freud: "'And—I must tell you (you were frank with me and I will be frank with you), I do *not* like to be the mother in transference—it always surprises and shocks me a little. I feel so very masculine.' I asked him if others had what he called this mother-transference on him. He said ironically and I thought a little wistfully, 'O, *very many*'" (Doolittle [H. D.], *Tribute to Freud*, 146–47).

9. Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary*, 183–84.

10. Ferrell, *Copula*, 2–3.

11. Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," 29–30.

12. *Ibid.*, 29. I will return to Ruddick's second radical notion, already hinted at in this passage—that "maternal thinking" is independent of gender—even though she retracts this possibility in her later work. See also her *Maternal Thinking*.

13. Andrea O'Reilly and Sara Ruddick, "A Conversation about *Maternal Thinking*," in O'Reilly, *Maternal Thinking*, 18.

14. Le Dœuff, "Ants and Women," 53.

15. Ruddick, "Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth," 29–30. Ruddick is intriguingly close in this view to Jacques Rancière's account of Marxist orthodoxy in its inability to represent workers as thinking people; see *The Philosopher and His Poor*.

16. Ruddick refers here to Hirsch's iconic *The Mother/Daughter Plot*.

17. See Le Dœuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, 100, 126. See also Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*. For approaches that proceed instead from some conception of the embodied difference between women and men—often influenced by Luce Irigaray's (dis)engagement with philosophy—see Diprose, *The Bodies of Women*; Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies*; and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*.

18. I am paraphrasing here the conclusion to Stanton, "Difference on Trial." Moreover, a woman's identity may be less temporally restricted than a mother's. Is a mother always a mother? Even, say, after the death of an only child? *When* does a person become a mother? Right-wing pronatalists across the globe assume that maternity is not only enduring but that it precedes birth. On the other hand, Condorcet described pregnancy

as a “passing” indisposition, like gout or a cold, which should not prevent women from exercising their universal rights as citizens (*Condorcet*, 98). This was, obviously, an argument in defense of women’s rights, not mothers’. Appeals on behalf of the citizen-mother have since become frequent in the West wherever “separate-sphere” gender ideology makes maternity a civic obligation. See the introduction to Parker et al., *Nationalisms and Sexualities*.

19. I understand this problem to be structural. The index to Christina Howells’s superb collection *French Women Philosophers* suggests that only 5 of its 453 pages bear on the topic of motherhood. On the vexed problem of the universal (particularly in French feminist thought), see Schor, “French Feminism Is a Universalism”; and Scott, “Universalism and the History of Feminism.” See also Scott’s later essay “French Universalism in the Nineties.”

20. See Oliver, “Motherhood, Sexuality, and Pregnant Embodiment.”

21. Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood,” 32.

22. Arendell, “Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood,” 1192.

23. Griffin, “Feminism and Motherhood,” 33, 35.

24. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, ix.

25. Bowlby, “Generations,” 2.

26. Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 492. See also Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*. Jeffner Allen proceeded to argue what Beauvoir never quite did—that “motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers and because it denies to females the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free” (*Sinuosities*, 28–29).

27. Dinnerstein, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*; Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*; and Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*. On the simultaneous rise of the “new momism” in the U.S popular media, see Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*.

28. See, for example, Garner, Kahane, and Sprengnether, *The (M)other Tongue*; Sayers, *Mothers of Psychoanalysis*; and Doane and Hodges, *From Klein to Kristeva*. Curiously, mother–son relationships have received much less recent attention—perhaps because of the limited number of stories (all of them homophobic) that psychoanalysis *can* tell about the son’s mother, held responsible for both his heterosexual and homosexual object choices (the latter often indistinguishable from psychosis). Freud’s *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* remains a touchstone here (esp. 52–56), as does “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in *General Psychological Theory*, 56–82. See Barande, *Le maternel singulier*.

29. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 84–85.
30. De Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*, 198.
31. See, for example, Schwartz, *Sexual Subjects*; Mamo, *Queering Reproduction*.
32. Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 239. See also “Stabat Mater.”
33. Kristeva, *Black Sun*, 27–28.
34. Irigaray, “And the One Doesn’t Stir without the Other,” 1, and *Sexes and Genealogies*, 18. Unlike Kristeva, Irigaray has never thought matricide a good idea. See also Jacobs, *On Matricide*.
35. Snitow, “Feminism and Motherhood,” 42. Nancy Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* famously begins with the words “Women mother” (3). Most readers have understood this phrase to constitute a complete sentence, with *women* as the subject and *mother* as the verb. But “women mother” is also *not* a sentence but two nouns suspended in metonymic apposition. The grammatical undecidability of these alternatives allegorizes the problem that maternity poses for feminism. See Dever, *Skeptical Feminism*, 78.
36. See, for example, Irigaray, “Women-Mothers, the Silent Substratum of the Social Order,” 50; and Plaza, “The Mother/the Same,” 78. Plaza replies that the mother is a phantasm, not a person: “‘Mom’ is neither a woman nor an individual, it is someone whom I perceive as (or rather whom I represent to myself as) closely linked to myself, quasi-instinctively” (78). Though I will argue below from different premises, I share with Plaza the assumption that, empirically, no one has ever seen a mother.
37. See Parkin, *Kinship*, 14; and Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 4.
38. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 19.
39. Rose, “Mothers and Authors,” 217.
40. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 19.
41. For example, the distinction between action and identity enabled Ruddick to propose what she later retracted: that the gender of the person who mothers a child is irrelevant even as the gender of the one who gives birth is not (“Thinking Mothers/Conceiving Birth”). Whether a man can be said to mother (as opposed to *be* a mother) has been a question in social psychology at least since Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering*, which promoted men’s active involvement in parenting as an antidote to patriarchy. For representatively polar responses, see Balbus, *Mourning and Modernity*, and Hollway, *The Capacity to Care*. Focusing largely on the *sense* of the maternal and its limits, this question seems to me mooted in the wake of the new medical technologies, which have made the status of the maternal *referent* uniquely problematic.
42. Weiss, *Refiguring the Ordinary*, 183. Hollway, for example, distin-

guishes “actual mothers” from gender-unspecified “maternal subjectivity” in an effort to preserve motherhood as a uniquely female experience (*The Capacity to Care*, 64). But what, today, is an “actual mother”? Has there ever been one?

43. Carsten, *After Kinship*, 7.

44. Parkin, *Kinship*, 126.

45. Bartkowski, *Kissing Cousins*, 14. David Eng has suggested that we make this distinction meaningful by racializing it; see *The Feeling of Kinship*. Recent scholarship at the intersection of gender, kinship, and medical technology has been both prodigious and highly innovative. See especially Culley, Hudson, and Van Rooij, *Marginalized Reproduction*; Franklin, *Embodied Progress*; Franklin and McKinnon, *Relative Values*; Franklin and Ragoné, *Reproducing Reproduction*; Ginsburg and Rapp, *Conceiving the New World Order*; Inhorn and van Balen, *Infertility around the Globe*; Lesnik-Oberstein, *On Having an Own Child*; Mamo, *Queering Reproduction*; Parkin and Stone, *Kinship and Family*; Ragoné, *Surrogate Motherhood*; Ragoné and Twine, *Ideologies and Technologies of Motherhood*; Stanworth, *Reproductive Technologies*; Stone, *Kinship and Gender*; Strathern, *Reproducing the Future*; Strathern, *Kinship, Law, and the Unexpected*; and Thompson, *Making Parents*.

46. Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color*, 203–29. As the subtitle of this influential essay implies, Spillers is concerned with what becomes of maternity’s sense (though not, I think, its referent) when the right to claim motherhood has been stolen under slavery: “For the African female, then, the various inflections of patriarchalized female gender—‘mother,’ ‘daughter,’ ‘sister,’ ‘wife’—are not available in the historical instance” (232). On procreation in the absence of legally sanctioned kinship, see Bentley, “The Fourth Dimension.”

47. Popular opinion to the contrary, genetic testing has not made paternity certain: “The modern technique of DNA or genetic fingerprinting may seem greatly to have improved accuracy in these respects, but only specialists can be directly aware of the degree and nature of proof: the courts, who have to take such decisions, and the population at large have to take this on trust, unless they are prepared to carry out the necessary experiments to prove the matter for themselves. (In fact, even genetic fingerprinting has increasingly come under legal challenge.) For the layperson in Western societies, therefore, knowledge of this sort is a matter of faith in experts, of belief engendered ultimately by an essentially socially determined attitude towards reason and science as superior to all other forms of knowledge. Elsewhere, different attitudes may prevail, and there may be no interest in, or realization of, scientific proof at all, so that kinship be-

comes even more evidently a matter of social definition, of belief. And the means of validating any belief itself constitutes a belief. Anthropologically, ‘truth’ is not the truth but whatever people in a particular society and/or set of circumstances decide is the truth: even in our own society, the two do not necessarily coincide. Ultimately, therefore, despite occasional scientific interventions, paternity, and kinship generally, remain matters of purely *social* definition” (Parkin, *Kinship*, 5–6).

48. Freud, “Family Romances” (1909), in *The Standard Edition* 9:239.

49. Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis” (1909), in *The Standard Edition* 10:233n1.

50. Freud, “Moses and Monotheism” (1939), in *The Standard Edition* 23:114. In her commentary in *Ms* magazine on the historic Baby M surrogacy case, Phyllis Chesler argued (without invoking Freud as her precedent) “that motherhood is a ‘fact,’ an ontologically different category than ‘fatherhood,’ which is an ‘idea’” (quoted in Laqueur, “The Facts of Fatherhood,” 207). Lacan followed Freud in suggesting that “mothers are ‘real,’ fathers are only conceptual; to be a father is, literally, only a concept” (MacCannell, *Figuring Lacan*, 207). The notion that the mother alone is perceivable (which Freud encountered previously in J. J. Bachofen and Lewis Henry Morgan) has frequently resurfaced in anthropology. For example, “Motherhood is different. Conception is an internal and microscopic event that we laymen believe scientists have investigated, whereas gestation and birth, and with them the relation of physical motherhood, are macroscopic processes that, in principle, anyone can see for himself. Hence the descriptions of physical motherhood in diverse cultures do not vary as greatly as with fatherhood. . . . Fathers are not self-evident as mothers are” (Barnes, “Genetrix : Genitor :: Nature : Culture?,” 68).

51. Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 41. Derrida returned often in the mid- and late 1990s to the “legal fiction” of paternity in James Joyce and Freud. See, for example, *Politics of Friendship*, 168n25; *Archive Fever*, 47–48; *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 26–27; and *H.C. for Life, That Is to Say—*, 109. I am grateful to Jolan Bogdan for a preview of “The Uncertainty of the Mother,” which concerns Derrida’s little-known book *Ki az anya?*.

52. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 27.

53. Freud, “A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men,” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 43; and Derrida and Roudinesco, *For What Tomorrow*, 41.

54. Derrida, “La veilleuse,” 27–28; my translation. See also Nancy, *À plus d’un titre*.

55. Kofman, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat*, which also reflects on Leonardo da

Vinci's "two mothers" (63–64). On Freud's differently multiple mothers, see Swan, "'Mater' and Nannie"; as well as Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother*, 13–21. Tina Chanter reads Kofman's maternal doublings alongside Freud's in "Playing with Fire."

56. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato*, 82.

57. Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, 85. In describing "the mother's passion for the new subject that will be her child, provided he/she ceases to be her double" (86), Kristeva never imagines this new subject as having to reckon with multiple mothers—with kinds of doubling that fracture the mother's "side" from the start. This problem is hardly Kristeva's alone: psychoanalysis more generally has thus far resisted asking how the new family forms have affected retroactively its most cherished assumptions about the nature and genealogy of desire.

58. Derrida, *Glas*, 115–17.

59. See Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*. My thinking here again owes much to Jacqueline Rose's *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, which wonders what, in epistemological and ethical terms, the mother has been always "asked to bear" (158, 161). Kelly Oliver recently reflected on the work of "certain feminist philosophers who set out to prove themselves in the world of the father by vigorously protecting the mother from victimization by patriarchy" ("Julia Kristeva's Maternal Passions," 2). Oliver acknowledged that she had been considering her own writing "and that of others who revalorize the maternal in order to protect it from debasement within phallic culture by beating up on their philosophical fathers both to prove that they themselves are worthy of the band of brothers and to protect their mothers/themselves from victimization by those very brothers, whom they love and yet resent because they will someday become the beating, and therefore deserving to be beaten, father. This is not necessarily the agenda of feminists who revalue motherhood as a vocation for themselves, so that they can become mothers worthy of recognition by mankind. Rather, these are feminist avengers who take on the father/brothers to save the mother whom they love, as ambivalent as that love may be due to the abjection of maternity within the family of man" (2). But because these avenging philosophers are "too invested in pleasing the father with our intellectual pursuits to *be* her, yet too loyal to [the mother's] craziness, to her depression, to *be* him" (3), they preempt the mother even in the act of "protecting" her since, once more, this mother cannot be a philosopher, even an avenging one.

60. On the paradigmatic status of the mother/father opposition in Saussurean linguistics, see my "Holding the *Fort*!"

61. "Derridabase" in Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 210.

Bennington adds that “this anteriority communicates with the common name of ‘mother’” just as, for Derrida, “writing” communicates with its specific concept even while generalizing itself beyond its traditional limits (211). See also Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, 133–34, which makes this point in a slightly different idiom: “This is why the so-called question of the mother is, first of all, the question of a maternal retreat [*d’un retrait maternel*]—of the mother as retreat and of the retreat of the mother [*de la mère comme retrait et du retrait de la mère*].” Nancy, in *The Birth to Presence*, speaks similarly of a form of maternity “more ‘maternal’ than maternity, more archaic than any gestation of any genesis” (29).

62. Derrida, *Positions*, 45. Derrida observes later in this interview that “dissemination figures that which *cannot* be the father’s” (86). It cannot be the mother’s either, for the very same reasons.

63. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters*, 6.

64. Mossman, *Politics and Narratives of Birth* 2, 5, 6; and Ferrell, *Copula*, x.

65. Guenther, *The Gift of the Other*, 8. But does birth occur at and as a moment? If so, which one? The question of when a fetus becomes a person has more to do with politico-religious judgments than with literality understood as the ground or condition of sensation. See Deutscher, “The Inversion of Exceptionality”; and O’Byrne, *Nativity and Finitude*.

66. Guenther, “Being-from-Others,” 99.

67. Huffer, *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*, 7.

68. Shetty, “(Dis)figuring the Nation,” 72.

69. Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 197.

70. Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 66–71.

71. Sandford, “Masculine Mothers?,” 182–83.

72. *Ibid.*, 183. See also Bevis, “‘Better than Metaphors?’”

73. Guenther, “‘Like a Maternal Body,’” 131.

74. Cavarero, “Birth, Love, Politics,” 19. Butler’s response to Cavarero informs my own approach to the singular/general relationship; see *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 34. François Raffoul counters the notion that Heidegger neglected birth or simply opposed it to death; see *The Origins of Responsibility*, 270–72.

75. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 74–75.

76. Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, 58. Of course, Barthes’s mother was not his *mother* on the day the photo was taken. Barthes’s recently published *Mourning Diary* has this especially moving entry for November 5: “Sad afternoon. Shopping. Purchase (frivolity) of a tea cake at the bakery. Taking care of the customer ahead of me, the girl behind the counter says *Voilà*. The expression I used when I brought *maman* something, when I was taking care of her. Once, toward the end, half-conscious, she repeated,

faintly, *Voilà* (I'm here, a word we used to each other all our lives). The word spoken by the girl at the bakery brought tears to my eyes. I kept on crying quite a while back in the silent apartment" (37). Perhaps *voilà* could have such intimate significance for Barthes and his mother only by being also, constantly, on everybody's lips.

77. Freud, "Negation" in *The Standard Edition* 19:233. I take issue, in short, with any ethics that possesses the mother in recalling her, as in the following instance: "For the gift of birth does not merely give me a range of possibilities; it gives me, brings me forth as an existent. To repeat this originating possibility as my own choice may be authentic; but this 'authenticity' requires the profoundly unethical erasure of the other who grants the sheer possibility of existence by giving birth to me: *my mother*" (Guenther, "Being-From-Others," 107; my emphasis). As if the possessive were not another form of the mother's erasure.

78. Pontalis, *Windows = Fenêtres*, 97.

79. What makes "Ersatz" all the more interesting is its difference from the anecdote that seems to have formed its basis:

A patient of some sixty-odd years has just gone to visit her elderly mother who, as they say, is not all there. After her visit, she comes straight to a session, still filled with an intense rage like that of a child when her mother refuses to do what she expects from her. So, somewhat foolishly I admit, but one should never be scared to admit one's own inadequacy or stupidity, I tell her: "You don't really think that at her age and in the state she's in, you have the power to cure your mother, to *change* her, do you?"

Then the idea came to me, and I'll freely confess it is not a very original one, but it had never forced itself upon me in that way before, that the desire to change one's mother comes from the fact—among others—that no matter how you qualify her—bad, good, good-enough—the mother is not interchangeable. And it is precisely because one cannot exchange her that one persists obstinately in changing her at all costs. By changing her, I mean either curing her from her depression, from her madness, or else devoting oneself to rendering her less absorbed in herself, ensuring that she attends us without watching us too closely—in other words, being present without being intrusive. We can all find father-substitutes. It is even the precondition for girls to overcome their Oedipus complex, and boys can choose their teacher or their analyst as a father-figure, not having dared to confront their own fathers directly.

However, in my opinion, there is no *ersatz* for the mother. She is irreplaceable, she is unchangeable. An analyst can try all he likes to "act the mother" (as Ferenczi was accused of doing); he is *not* the mother. ("Notable Encounters," 155)

Unlike “Ersatz,” which seems to acknowledge the Derridean point that “there is no maternity that does not appear subject to substitution,” Pontalis is emphatic here that the mother’s true being—True Being “itself”—resists imitation . . . if anything can. See Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 88.

80. Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 5; and Bennington and Derrida, *Jacques Derrida*, 36n.

81. See Deutscher, *Yielding Gender*, 86–87, and “Autobiobodies.” To notice life *in* the work is to work simultaneously against immanentism and psychobiography.

82. See Neppi, *Le babil et la caresse*; and O’Donohoe, “Living with Mother.” For example, when Sartre objects strenuously to describing the present as “pregnant with the future [*gros de l’avenir*],” is he complaining that the present is thereby misconceived as non-self-identical, or that the present is misconceived as a mother? Perhaps these questions are the same? (*Being and Nothingness*, 124–25).

83. See, for example, Chakravorty, Milevska, and Barlow, *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, 153, 163; Guardiola-Rivera, “Interview with Gayatri Spivak”; Hayot, “‘The Slightness of My Endeavor,’” 262; Spivak, *The Post-colonial Critic*, 83, 90, 93; Spivak, “Translation as Culture,” 20; and Sanders, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, 122. An entire essay could be devoted to the following paragraph, which precedes a discussion of language acquisition in Melanie Klein: “I am standing with my mother in Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris. For a week we have fed our ears on academic French. Suddenly I hear an exchange in the harsh accents of upstate New York. I turn to my mother and say, in Bengali, roughly this: ‘Hard to listen to this stuff.’ And my mother: ‘Dear, a mother tongue.’ My mother, caught up as she was in the heyday of resistance to the Raj, still extended imaginative charity to English” (Spivak, “Rethinking Comparativism,” 612).

84. See, for example, Safranski, *Martin Heidegger*, 144. Is this gesture simply an expression of gratitude? What other affects (aggression above all) could it be thought to convey? Oedipally playing mother off against lover (perhaps to the point of parody), Catherine Clément returns to this moment in her novel *Martin and Hannah*, 97–98: “Yes, Martin could place the book on his mother’s body, over her heart. Mere printed pages, neatly bound. No conflict between that and the gift of thinking. His lover had been infused with the spirit of his work; his mother had been given the material object, as was her due. The dead woman and the absent woman were those destined to receive Martin’s thinking.” Heidegger kept a small

photograph of his mother on his writing desk; see Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger*, 121.

85. See Caputo, “The Absence of Monica,” 150.

86. Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, 48. My thanks to Avital Ronell for gifting me with this passage. See Ronell, *The Telephone Book*, 20–25.

87. This scene of maternal instruction recalls another described by Freud: “When I was six years old and was given my first lessons by my mother, I was expected to believe that we were all made of earth and must therefore return to earth. This did not suit me and I expressed doubts of the doctrine. My mother thereupon rubbed the palms of her hands together—just as she did in making dumplings, except that there was no dough between them—and showed me the blackish scales of epidermis produced by the friction as a proof that we were made of earth. My astonishment at this ocular demonstration knew no bounds and I acquiesced in the belief which I was later to hear expressed in the words: *Du bist der Natur einen Tod schuldig* [Thou owest Nature a death]” (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 238–39). Entirely silent during this “ocular demonstration,” Amalia Nathanson Freud has taught her son two lessons here, one explicitly about the inevitability of death and the other implicitly about the difference between two kinds of thinking—maternal *Handwerk* and Theory proper. On the hand as an organ of thought, see Derrida, “Heidegger’s Hand (Geschlecht II),” in *Psyche*, 2:37. For another reading of the Freud passage, see Kofman, *The Enigma of Woman*, 74–78.

88. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, 7. I return to Nietzsche’s maternity in this book’s coda.

89. Foucault, “What Is an Author?,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. 2, 217.

90. *Ibid.*, 219.

91. For example, criticizing Heidegger’s German-Jewish heirs for “overlooking the intellectual threads that precipitated his Nazi involvement,” Richard Wolin never wonders at the mother’s absence in his account of genealogical transmission: “Thus, like a Greek tragedy—though on a smaller scale—the sins of the father will be visited upon the daughters and sons” (*Heidegger’s Children*, 20). Large or small, Greek tragedies never omit mothers.