

Relational Aspects of Migrant Mothering in Nathacha Appanah's *La Noce d'Anna* and Ying Chen's *La Lenteur des montagnes*

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Narratives of migrant mothering are a small but distinct feature of the dynamic landscape of contemporary literatures of mobility and the growing repertoire of narratives of mothering in French.ⁱ However, they are not included in Gill Rye's ground-breaking study *Narratives of Mothering* (2009) which discusses a wide range of mothering experiences represented from the mothers' point of view in contemporary women's writing in France. This notable absence is arguably due to two reasons – the time period and the geographical space covered by the study. Rye's book focuses on "mothers' own narratives of mothering, in writing by women in France [...] from the early 1990s through to the first years of the twenty-first century" (15). Narratives of migrant mothering emerge as a theme at the turn of the twenty-first century, especially in its second decade, and in contemporary women's writing in French rather than in France only. These literatures as well as their creators inhabit culturally and geographically expanded spaces spanning across several countries, often even continents, cultures, and languages.

Despite a number of major contemporary transcultural writers of French expression (Nancy Huston, Ananda Devi, Ying Chen and Catherine Cusset among others) having at least one matrifocal narrative to their name,ⁱⁱ representations of the mothering experience in the context of migration have not yet been widely discussed and deserve greater critical attention.ⁱⁱⁱ This article considers two examples of narratives of migrant mothering, Nathacha Appanah's novel *La Noce d'Anna* (2005) and Ying Chen's book-length essay, *La Lenteur des montagnes* (2014) which explore the experience of bringing up children in an environment that is culturally and linguistically foreign to the mother.^{iv} Both texts are written from the point of view of a migrant mother whose children are about to leave the family home and assume independent lives. As mothers who are seeing their children off to adulthood, both narrators critically assess their own mothering including the possible shortcomings. The mothers' negotiations of the maternal guilt in relation to the cultural difference between them and their offspring emerges as a dominant theme of both texts.

Sociologist Ann Phoenix argues that migrant mothering is often constructed as non-normative and is therefore infused with guilt from the outset (2011). Jacqueline Rose contends that Western discourses on motherhood are shaped by the logic of blame thus making motherhood "the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully

human" (2018 1). Significantly, she opens the book with a story about a Nigerian mother in the UK whose image was used to illustrate the public narrative blaming immigrant mothers for the UK's disintegrating national values and dwindling resources. In the discourse in which both mothers and migrants are constructed as targets of blame, migrant mothers suffer double liability and marginalisation possibly internalising the blame narrative that induces their feelings of guilt. In relation to Appanah and Chen, the questions this raises are the following: how do the migrant mothers represented in the texts at hand perceive their migrant maternal guilt and how do they regulate it? Critics have argued that cultural difference can result in an affective distance between migrant mothers and their children (Rice 2011, Kistnareddy 2015). Conversely, this article questions ways in which mothers portrayed in both texts navigate the complicated cultural terrain of their mothering while establishing and maintaining lasting affective ties with their adult children across the cultural divide.

Appanah was born in Mauritius to parents of the Indian diaspora and relocated to France in her mid-twenties to continue her career as a journalist. Appanah's first language is creole and she was educated in both English and French, electing French as her language of writing. Her first two novels are set in India and Mauritius respectively, whereas *La Noce d'Anna* is set in France and is, in her own words, her "livre d'adulte" (Rice). The narrative subject is the forty-two-year-old Mauritius-born writer, Sonia, the mother of the twenty-three-year-old daughter, Anna, who was born and raised in France. The story is Sonia's account of Anna's wedding day punctuated with flashbacks of her entire journey as a mother. The novel starts with both women getting ready for the day and closes with their intimate conversation at the end, marking a new stage in their relationship.

Ying Chen was born and educated in China where she majored in French. She moved to Quebec in her late twenties following the Tiananmen Square protests of 1989 to take a creative writing course at McGill University and subsequently became a French-language author in Quebec. She now lives in Vancouver and continues to write in French. Chen's early novels were set in China and earned her the label of a "migrant author" (Chartier 304), which she contested by discarding place references in her later work. Chen's *La Lenteur des montagnes* takes the form of "an extended letter to her son" (Parker 2016 168) that is also a reflection on "a variety of topics, from ethics, to philosophy, to literary considerations" (*ibid*), including motherhood. The essay serves as a ritual of seeing off her younger son into adulthood. Both authors explore their negotiations of the cultural difference between themselves and their children and its emotional impact on their mothering experience.

Migrant Maternal Guilt

Phoenix observes that "numerous groups of mothers who are mothering in circumstances constructed as 'non-normative' are subject to public censure and can be said to be 'mothering on the margins'." (2011) Her long list of marginal mothers includes racialised and single mothers, and thus illuminates the

mothering experiences discussed by both Chen and Appanah. The narrative subjects of the texts analysed are non-white, living in predominantly white societies where their race comes to play an important role in their mothering experience. Furthermore, both narrative subjects are single mothers. Chen is a widow, whereas Sonia became a mother in her late teens as a single woman and made a conscious decision to raise her daughter by herself. Thus, the mothers portrayed in both texts mother in circumstances that are outside of what Phoenix describes as normatively constructed.

The scene in *La Noce* in which Anna gets lost in a shopping centre when she is five and has to be collected at the reception vividly illustrates the degree of public censure a mother displaying any sign of difference, in this case race, endures. Sonia comes running to the reception and the following exchange ensues:

- Qui êtes-vous ?
- Mais je suis la maman de la petite, la maman d'Anna. [...]
- Ce n'est pas possible.
- PARDON ? [...]

Je me suis jetée sur lui et tentais d'agripper Anna, mon cœur s'emballait, les larmes étaient là, elles débordaient, je n'y pouvais rien, je hurlais.

- C'est ma maman.

[...] Anna s'est approchée de moi, elle a glissé sa petite main moite dans la mienne et là, j'ai vu ce que le vigile avait vu. (122-3)

Anna resolves this fierce public conflict between two adults with a simple speech act "C'est ma maman" accompanied by the most commonplace gesture proving their kinship. This episode is formative for Sonia as a racialised mother in France poisoning the rest of her mothering experience with fear, as demonstrated when she says: "Je crois que si un jour on me demandait de résumer ma maternité, ce serait par ce sentiment là: la crainte" (175). Sonia's difference in this episode becomes synonymous with deficient mothering and the fear this has inspired may be interpreted as one of the reasons behind her decision to not transmit her culture and language to her daughter in an effort to conceal all other markers of difference.

Gill Craig and Lindsay O'Dell specify that due to its binary structure, the idea of a marginal mother is "constructed in relation to the centre, the assumed and idealized norm of mothering [...] where the norm is based on the white bourgeois family" (2011). Following this definition, everyone who is not white or middle class can be construed as deviating from the norm and thus failing in their roles as mothers, at least to a degree. Rye (2009 139) suggests that this discursive construction of good and bad mothering is at the heart of maternal guilt that has been a constitutive part of the mothering experience throughout history. Accordingly, Florence Ramond Journey reads Sonia's character against the Western discourses of good and bad mothering, including the pervasive "mommy myth" (78-79) – the belief that motherhood is eternally fulfilling and that there is only one narrow way of performing so-called good motherhood.^v She concludes that such categorisation marginalises Sonia as a mother who finds sacrificial motherhood alien and is equally invested in her creative writing career as she is

in caring for her daughter. It follows that maternal guilt is even more accentuated for migrant mothers like Sonia due to their supposed non-normativity. She feels remorseful over raising her daughter without a father and away from her own family as demonstrated when she says: "J'ai peut-être donné à Anna tout mon amour mais je ne lui ai pas donné une famille." (106) Her overriding guilt is even more prominently inscribed in a recurrent dream featuring her facing a jury without knowing what she is accused of. She always wakes up from the dream with an unpleasant feeling that she is judged for having brought up her daughter badly. Sonia's haunting sense of fear and guilt of having faltered in her mothering thus originates in her maternal difference. First, due to having a different skin colour to her daughter, second, for opting out of both the nuclear and extended family. Thus, Sonia's difference that leads to her marginality as a mother results in what can be called maternal silence. As a consequence, she would not talk to her daughter about her absent father nor teach her native creole or tell her about her own family back in Mauritius, an act which would give her some sense of family belonging if not through physical contact, then at least through family stories.

Both Alison Rice and Ashwiny O. Kistnareddy use a postcolonial approach to frame Sonia's silence and maternal difference as a wider sense of alterity of a post-colonial subject living in France (Rice 2011, Kistnareddy 15). Rice suggests that Sonia's alienation of a migrant and racialised subject in contemporary France expands into the intimate family space and dominates the relationship between the Mauritius-born, dark-skinned Sonia and her French-born fair-skinned daughter, Anna, creating an emotional distance between them. Kistnareddy also focuses on Sonia's immigrant status claiming that "Anna may have been born and bred in France and adheres to French mores and culture, however she cannot be completely French by virtue of having an immigrant mother." (174) Many would agree that all the enumerated attributes and the French passport would suffice to make someone fully French as the French national identity is arguably diverse. The fact that "Anna never questions her identity" (Kistnareddy 178) also suggests that she is settled in her French identification. Kistnareddy further claims that Sonia's determination to not pass on her native language and culture to her daughter amounts to "her apparent failure as a mother" (175). The wording here echoes the dominant discourse directed at migrant mothers who find themselves in a crossfire of conflicting expectations, blamed for not passing their culture and language to their children on the one hand, and for failing to integrate, nurturing difference and subverting cultural and societal codes by bringing their children up in "foreign" linguistic and cultural paradigms, on the other. I agree with Kistnareddy in that linguistic and cultural transmission can facilitate the creation of a lasting emotional link between migrant mothers and children. That said, I find that conflating the maternal choice to not transmit her culture of origin to her children or failing to do so with maternal failure is harsh, unsympathetic, and simply not true. In what follows I will demonstrate that cultural difference within the family does not necessarily imply emotional distance and hardly passes for maternal failure. Migrant mothers and their children in the texts analysed show the ability to create and maintain intimate relationships whilst allowing the space the cultural and personal difference between them.

Transcultural Mother; French Daughter

Anna, who is only portrayed through Sonia's perspective, does not enjoy a double culture like her mother nor, as Kistnareddy has observed, does she experience any identity issues. Seen by Sonia as "si française et si ironique" (86), Anna is represented as belonging to a collective identity dominated by a set of values and cultural and societal codes characteristic of the French middle class. She studies accounting, opts for an early marriage with a wealthy boy who is going to pay for the wedding, picks the trendiest hair salon in town for the makeover before the wedding, and sticks to beauty norms promoted in women's magazines. In the absence of a larger family belonging, Anna compensates for this by strongly identifying with mainstream French culture presumably accessible to her through schooling, friends and popular media. In contrast, Sonia who favours individualism, originality and singularity, embraces the cultural identity paradigm that Kistnareddy describes as "physically Indo-Mauritian but intellectually cosmopolitan" (178) and that fits in closely with Ariane Dagnino's definition of transcultural identity. Dagnino claims that transcultural individuals live "on the border between cultures" (2015 38) enjoying a relationship of distance with their own cultural roots as they transcend their "own culture not to deny it, but expand" (38) on it. They also develop an individualised as opposed to collective identity and are able to "dynamically select from a myriad of different cultural offerings what best suits them depending on the contexts and the circumstances" (127). This suggests that transcultural identities are constructed through personalised selection of values in relation to the different cultures a migrant individual has lived in. Sonia adheres to this identity production mechanism as different to Anna's identity construction based on a systematic adoption of a set of cultural values associated with one country or region. For Sonia leaving Mauritius is a logical progression of her life. She reveals strong agency when she says: "partir, quitter tout cela me semblait normal, un acte évident [...] de la vie, de ma vie" (85). She is deeply marked by her first experience of France and certain aspects of the French culture which enrich her as demonstrated when she says: "Je m'arrête avec cérémonie devant les bouquinistes, si heureux qu'ils soient là encore, me réconciliant avec toutes les déceptions que j'ai eues" (86). She identifies with the French intellectual community embedded in the image of the *bouquinistes* along the river Seine. Bittersweet as her French experience eventually turns out to be, she adopts the French love of books as her value. Sonia's transculturality is further confirmed by the fact that before becoming a mother and settling down in France, she goes to London where she falls in love with an English student, Matthew, whose baby she becomes pregnant with. She decides to keep and raise the child in his absence and outside of his knowledge but in celebration of their love. All of this suggests that Sonia departs from her roots at an early and formative age to embrace other cultures and ways of being in the world, constructing her identity by selecting different cultural influences and becoming a person and writer of transcultural sensibilities. That said, she carries a continued affective affiliation with Mauritius, as demonstrated in her dress style, for example, her favourite T-shirt that says "Mauritius" on it.

In line with the transnational sense of identity as described by Dagnino, Sonia conceives of home and belonging not in terms of place, country or nation, but in terms of selected communities of peers. For her, being with Matthew, her English boyfriend, is the closest she has ever come to feeling at home (69). However, there is one obstacle to perpetuating that sense of home and that is Matthew's overriding ambition to develop his career as a journalist in Africa. Therefore, Sonia sees it as her duty of love to let him live his dream, because in her words: "c'est ce qu'on fait quand on aime" (76). Thus, in Sonia's understanding of affective relationships, to love involves granting the object of love their alterity as opposed to seeking to possess or dominate them. Following a similar logic, Sonia has her daughter, Anna, in order to create home and belonging around her object of love, as demonstrated when she says: "Je savais que désormais, avec un enfant, quoi que je fasse j'aurais une ancre quelque part" (141). When Sonia is later haunted by guilt over her decision to keep Matthew out of her choice to have the baby, she regulates it by refusing to look back and rethink her life in terms of "what if", evident when she says: "le chemin jonché de peut-être est glissant" (106). Instead, she decides to stick to her decisions by acknowledging the reasons why she made them at the time when she did. For example, Sonia remembers briefly entertaining the possibility of going back to Mauritius but quickly abandoning the idea as her mother's reaction informs her that single motherhood is not an accepted social practice on the island. She thus cuts ties with her family and applies for French citizenship, making France the country of her motherhood. Significantly, within a few months of Anna's birth, Sonia's manuscript is accepted for publication thus also turning France into the country where she exists as a published author, which is arguably the core part of her identity that precedes her identity as a mother, confirming France as the right setting for mothering since it accommodates her identity as a writer too.

Transcultural Mother; Son Without a Country

Chen's essay, *La Lenteur des montagnes*, also opens with a declaration of maternal guilt:

Mon enfant, ma vie,

Depuis longtemps déjà je souhaite t'écrire. Je ressens le besoin de compenser les bandes dessinées que je n'ai pas faites, mais que tu aurais adorées. [...] Je ne savais répondre à tes questions quand tu étais encore très jeune : « qui a gagné la guerre ? Les Gaulois ou les Romains ? Les Chinois ou les Japonais ? » Pour réaliser un album amusant, il faut souvent des réponses simples et claires, que je n'ai pas. (9)

Chen's textual self feels that as a migrant mother she has not been able to provide her son with explanations that would present historical or other truths of life from a single national vantage point. Bizarrely, she experiences this as a shortcoming of her mothering that requires compensating for with this long essay which, as I argue elsewhere, is "a symbolic act [of mothering], initiating her son into some of the ways of the adult world—the world of social norms and language(s)" (Kačkutė 2018). Therefore, the migrant mother's sense of guilt as represented in this text, originates from the difference in the degree of belonging

the mother and her child enjoy in both their country of residence, Canada, and the country of origin, China.

In terms of her own and her son's belonging in Canada, and in the same way as in Appanah's novel, Chen's guilt is primarily associated with race, as demonstrated when she says: "Cette douleur en toi vient de ton amour pour ta mère, de ta honte et de ton regret parfois d'être né tel que tu es" (LM 11-12). Shame in relation to the origins refers to racism, of which Chen's son is a victim, whereas silencing of the word "Chinese" here contains the suppressed pain caused by unchallenged racial discrimination and the intensity of the mother's pain for having inflicted it on her son. Secondly, in Canada, both Chen and her son are identified as Chinese despite of the more complex reality of their identities. At the beginning of the essay, Chen declares her transnational sensibility that is no longer attached to a single national identity by saying "je ne peux plus tenir à quoi que ce soit de local, que je bois de toutes les mers, que je respire l'air de l'univers" (13-4). Throughout the text, Chen carefully constructs herself as a transcultural author defined by Dagnino as a writer who lives and writes between several cultures and languages, who engages creatively with cultural and identity negotiations that are part of transcultural and transnational life (1). Chen talks about her literary influences that are transcultural in that they consist of the classical works of both Western and Chinese classical canons. She then describes the long and complicated process of learning French and ways in which that has contributed to her transformation from a person with a single cultural identity into a transcultural individual who has accomplished "la grande traversée des eaux, d'abord du Pacifique et ensuite de l'Atlantique" (LM 23) not only physically but in terms of cultural values and sensibilities too. Reflecting on her transcultural identity Chen discusses the importance of writing in a non-native language, whereby "la langue d'écriture [...] devient la langue qui porte toutes les langues" (LM 74) and allows her to draw from multiple cultural sources at the same time.^{vi}

That said, despite Chen's cosmopolitan and transcultural sensibilities, she still has the luxury of one native country, with a language, culture and identity attached to it, as demonstrated when she says: "il est facile d'être différent quand on devient immigrant adulte" (39). As an adult, the development of one's self is complete and when undergoing further transformations, stays intact at its core. Having grown up and completed her education in China, Chen identifies as Chinese in both China and Canada. Having made a conscious decision to leave China and emigrate to Canada makes it easier for her to accept the adversity of both racism and non-belonging in Canada as she is aware of the reasons behind her choice to relocate. In contrast, her son is put in the position of being classified as a stranger in his native country. In the essay Chen claims that Canadian politics that celebrates cultural difference turns her son into a person without a country as it implies that his country, language, culture and race of origin, which he is encouraged to be proud of, are Chinese. Therefore, the main cultural difference between Chen and her son lies in the nature of their lack of belonging, which is voluntary for Chen and non-voluntary in the case of her son. The son's alterity in Canada is further enhanced by the fact that his mother tongue (103),

Chinese, does not enjoy the same symbolic status as French does in China. In some places and circumstances French is still regarded as a language of culture and progress, associated with refinement and sophistication, whereas, as the following passage suggests, the narrator sees an association of Chinese in Canada with immigrants and marginalisation: "autrefois on trouvait les immigrants chinois trop pauvres, trop sales, trop laids [...] Aujourd'hui, on les trouve trop riches" (37). This makes it easy for Chen to learn French well in China and very hard for her son to learn Chinese in Canada since: "malgré la politique du multiculturalisme [...] les cours de chinois sont rarement offerts dans les écoles publiques à Vancouver où la jeune population chinoise représente près de la moitié des enfants, sinon plus" (*ibid.*).

In terms of their relationship with China, Chen's son does not have the same privilege of belonging there that is granted to his mother by the right of birth, as demonstrated when Chen says "tu n'as pas encore, en dépit de ton acte de naissance, le même droit de cité que moi à Shanghai" (26). The fact that she no longer lives there or holds the Chinese passport suggests that belonging is more of a symbolic and emotional rather than legal or natural phenomenon. Thus, the privilege of emotional belonging in any one country is unavailable to Chen's son who was born and grew up "loin de la langue et de la culture de [sa] mère" (38). Chen's textual self therefore feels that she has deprived her son of a homeland, of one undisputed place of belonging declaring that: "Contrairement à moi, ton frère et toi n'avez pas un pays – bon ou mauvais – sur lequel vous appuyer" (38) [...] "Tu es projeté dans cette errance que tu n'as pas choisie, que j'ai seule commencée" (54). These statements testify to the harshness of the condition of migrant motherhood that in Chen's case results in a disproportionate sense of responsibility she takes upon herself over her son's identity and the severity with which she blames herself for not giving him a simple sense of belonging.

In response to the complexity of the cultural context of her mothering and in an effort to regulate her sense of guilt, Chen adopts a radically different mothering strategy than Sonia's character in *La Noce*. She puts an enormous effort into teaching her son Chinese, which she describes as a "combat quotidien, croyant qu'à ton âge il est encore possible d'apprendre une langue, même étrangère, presque parfaitement" (LM 72). Her bid to transmit her own mother tongue to her son turns out to be a Sisyphean task, as Chen admits that "les langues ne sont pas faites pour durer [...] la migration [...] a précipité la mort d'une langue au sein d'une famille" (72). That said, as I shall argue in the last section of this article, the transmission of the mother tongue, even if to a small degree, has its uses in the context of migrant motherhood.

In the face of her potential failure to ensure her son's full fluency in Chinese, Chen undertakes the writing of *La Lenteur* as a way to appease her guilty conscience of a migrant mother. Gabrielle Parker asserts that Chen's "foremost concern" in this essay "is to impress upon her son the relativity of difference" (2017 168), explaining that every difference of opinion and behaviour is the result of a specific angle from which the problem is considered. Parker thus suggests that Chen's philosophy in writing as well as mothering is based on the ability to draw from

multiple sources and practice a diversity of perspectives in a constant dialogue with herself (Parker 170). With this in mind and considering that her essay can be read as an act of mothering, it is possible to suggest that Chen instructs her son to navigate the terrains of identity politics and discourses with plasticity and gentle distance in order to thrive as an individual with a migrant background. Creating and sustaining a lasting emotional bond with her son in this cultural setting is a task that requires a high degree of delicacy and flexibility. The following section analyses ways in which the narrative maternal subjects of the texts at hand navigate their relationships across cultural difference and ensure lasting affective connections with their offspring.

Relation of Difference with Connection

Phoenix observes that "mothering is a relational process in which both parties, mothers and children, are agents who produce effects and are themselves affected as they act on the world" (Phoenix 2011). Alison Stone's concept of the maternal space is hinged on the same understanding of the interdependence of the mother and child characterised by their dynamic connectedness yet distinction (2012). The maternal space is based on Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic *chora*, which is a mobile, womblike entity that represents the embodied human relationship to language and creativity as well as the continuous mother-child bond throughout life (Kristeva 1984). Stone's maternal space inherits features of the *chora* and expands them into the social and cultural domain and is described as follows: "A mobile, temporal space, it takes concrete embodied shape over time as the mother and child's patterns of coming and going, thus intrinsically embodying the significance of their particular modes of being-together." (76) Becoming a mother implies an identity change. A new mother is herself a subject in the process of restructuring both her sense of herself and her relationship to her child. Thus, the mother provides the stability necessary for the child's development and is equally nurtured into her new self by the growing child. As such, through the maternal space, the child also has an active role to play in the construction of maternal identity. Thus, the enduring emotional link between migrant mothers and their children is safeguarded by their mutual participation in the maternal space in which a degree of alterity ensures the possibility of mutual growth and individuality.

Throughout Appanah's novel the roles of the mother and daughter are repeatedly reversed; Anna is often portrayed as a parental authority figure explaining the social codes of the French middle class to Sonia, demanding that she follows them at least in Anna's presence. Equally, she provides Sonia with affective care, when it is needed. When Sonia gets emotional during her speech at the wedding, Anna embraces her saying: "Vois-tu maman, je ne suis pas si différente de toi, au fond," (NA 147) – reassuring Sonia and symbolically validating her positive maternal impact on her daughter.

Sonia is portrayed as observing her daughter, taking in her difference silently and patiently, never criticising it, respecting it, providing space for it, assuming her daughter's alterity with love. Knowing that her daughter likes coffee, Sonia tries

to find her the perfect *cafetière*; on her wedding day, she wishes Anna to grow old together with her new husband, as she knows that this is what Anna values. However, she commits all those acts of love without completely compromising her own difference; she does not deprive herself of the time and space she needs to write. In her bid to assert her own distinct space within her relationship with Anna, Sonia permits herself the pleasure of going to bed with the estranged father of the groom. Caught *en flagrant délit* by her daughter, she is reduced to the role of a sexually transgressive adolescent. However, in the closing scene the mother and daughter are portrayed as sharing the maternal space of their mutual vulnerability and strength. Both women are represented as sitting close to one another under the stars, with Sonia finally telling Anna the story of her love for Matthew which establishes a new phase in their relationship: they exit the mother-daughter dynamics with unequal power relationship of an authoritative adult and a secretive young person to enter an equal rapport of two adult women. Anna gently presses Sonia's head against her stomach caressing her mother's hair, like one does when caressing a child. Then, in a sudden restoration of roles, Anna asks in a childish way: "Qu'est ce qui va se passer maintenant, maman?" (179) at which point Sonia takes Anna's face in her hands reassuring her with her eyes. The series of role reversals testifies to both mother and daughter's need for one another and their commitment to continuing support one another in their new roles as grown women. The novel closes with the image of Anna happily skipping into the arms of her new husband, embracing her future with joy and self-assurance, suggesting that rather than having failed as a mother, Sonia has navigated the emotional landscape of difference, love and belonging with emotional skill and wisdom, having brought up a daughter who knows what she wants and is not afraid to act on it, indicating a confidence produced by emotional security.

Mother-Son Bond through the Mother Tongue

In Chen's essay, the enduring connection with her son is established through a shared linguistic relationship. Having expressed her pain at his limited knowledge of Chinese, Chen's textual self concedes that ultimately, it does not matter whether he acquires absolute fluency in Chinese or not. What matters is "la capacité de sentir profondément une langue, une seule et n'importe laquelle" (91). It is not so much the actual language Chen speaks with her son that is important, but the capacity of that language to provide a common background for their intimate relation enabling their communication and perpetuating the mother-son bond.

Chen makes a distinction between the French word *langage* as opposed to *langue*. To her, *langue* refers to a language in the sense of Chinese, French or English, whereas "dans le langage, au fond de ce puits aussi vieux et en même temps aussi jeune que l'humanité, se trouve un concentré de soi et de collectif, du passé et du présent." (91) According to Stone "the maternal language" is a system that allows a child access to the social structures but is simultaneously inflected by "affective and unconscious meanings" (79) emanating from the child's relationship with the mother. If the mother provides the overall context for

the relational maternal space, which is effectively a mother-child space, Chen's native language and her son's mother tongue, Chinese, functions as the overall context for the embodied life-long communication between Chinese-born transcultural Chen and her Canadian son. Therefore, the particular relational *langage* that Chen shares with her grown-up son in any of the languages [*langues*] they opt for later in life is the linguistic embodiment of her own mother tongue that she passes on to him as a child. For this reason, even if Chen's son is not fluent in Chinese and she speaks French with a strong accent, they will always be able to communicate meaningfully because of their shared, embodied experience of all the different languages they speak. As a result, Chen will have nurtured children with highly competent linguistic and cultural skills. Again, rather than depriving her son of a simple cultural belonging in either China or Canada, Chen gives him enhanced linguistic skills and an opening to cultural difference that will facilitate his ability to navigate multiple cultural landscapes.

Conclusion

Bringing up children away from one's native language and culture carries its own challenges and as this analysis has shown, migrant mothers come under even greater scrutiny than mothers who display a smaller degree of difference in relation to the norm. Consequently, migrant mothers may experience an additional layer of guilt resulting from their supposed failure to provide the children with a reliable sense of belonging. And yet, migrant mothers may also cross the cultural boundaries between themselves and their children through their own transcultural sensibilities and culturally sensitive maternal efforts to protect and nurture their children as well as creating the best conditions for their growth. The one crossing that remains to be made is perhaps shifting the public attention from the possible inadequacies of migrant mothering to its conceivable strengths.

Acknowledgements: This work was supported by the Irish Research Council [Project ID: GOIPD/2016/252]

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Notes

ⁱ I would like to thank my co-editors, the anonymous peer reviewer, Julie Rodgers and Simona Cutcan for reading versions of this article and for their insightful comments.

ⁱⁱ Andrea O'Reilly defines a matrifocal narrative as "a narrative in which a mother plays a role of cultural and social significance, and in which motherhood is thematically elaborated and valued, and structurally central to the plot" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010: 3).

ⁱⁱⁱ Besides articles referred to later in this article, the other notable publication on the subject is Averis (2017).

^{iv} The novel *La Noce d'Anna* will be referred to as *La Noce* and the essay *La Lenteur des Montagnes* will be referred to as *La Lenteur* throughout the article. [is this usage uniform across all the articles in the collection?]

^v For a detailed discussion of the "mommy myth", see Douglas and Michaels (2004).

^{vi} For a detailed discussion on the nomadic consciousness that echoes transcultural sensibilities in Chen's work, see Julie Rodgers (2015).