

Introduction: Motherhood, Mobility, Migration in Twenty-First-Century Women's Writing

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Abstract

Despite the centrality of experiences of migration, exile, and displacement in our globalized world, there are surprisingly few literary narratives that tell the stories of mothers who mother on the move, who mother in or through several languages, across linguistic and cultural barriers, or who negotiate non-motherhood in transnational settings. This special issue seeks to right this imbalance by drawing attention to matrifocal and maternal narratives of migration, displacement, exile, expatriation, transnationality, and nomadism since they shed light on ways in which motherhood is negotiated in this relatively new reality. It explores the diversity of literary representations of migrant motherhood in contemporary women's writing and reflects on the poetics of motherhood and mothering across literature in different cultures and languages. In this way, the special issue contributes to the understanding of motherhood in a contemporary globalized world by shedding light on what often falls outside of the Western discourses of motherhood and mothering, thus offering fresh ways of imagining and living motherhood that is agential, empowered, and relational.

Evolving gender, capital, and mobility regimes of the twenty-first century mean that increasing numbers of women engage in mothering and providing for their children in the context of hypermobility. This brings about a compelling need to address maternal and matrifocal narratives of migration, displacement, exile, expatriation, transnationality, and nomadism since these all shed light on the ways motherhood is being negotiated in this relatively new reality. This special

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issue of *Contemporary Women's Writing* seeks to explore a diverse array of literary representations of migrant motherhood in contemporary women's writing.

The publication of Rachel Cusk's seminal memoir in 2001, *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*, spurred contestation of motherhood as a theme in contemporary women's writing. As Cusk says, "I Was Only Being Honest," in drawing on her personal experiences of early motherhood and aiming to be frank about it. Margaretha Fahlgren and Anna Williams point out that Cusk's book "stirred an emotional response among reviewers in which she was measured against an ideal image of the good mother and accused of narcissism" (36). Cusk opened up a new discursive space in the English-speaking world and beyond for other "honest" accounts of white mainstream, middle-class motherhood and mothering to emerge. The rich field of investigation within contemporary literary studies has focused extensively on mothers' own narratives of mothering (see, in chronological order, Giorgio 2002; Rye 2009; Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010; Journey and McPherson 2016; Edwards, Voicing Voluntary Childlessness 2016; Heffernan and Wilgus 2018; Rodgers and Huguely-Léger 2019; Björklund 2021; Henriksson, Williams, and Fahlgren 2023). It has been concerned with a wide range of different maternal experiences in literature, such as ambivalent motherhood, single motherhood, both voluntary and involuntary non-motherhood, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual motherhood, yet representations of migrant mothers have attracted noticeably less attention to date. This special issue focuses on literary voices and representations of mothers who mother on the move, who mother in or through several languages, across linguistic and cultural barriers, or who negotiate non-motherhood in transnational settings. This issue reflects too on the poetics of motherhood and mothering across literature in diverse cultures and languages.

The plots of matrifocal and maternal narratives of mobility and migration often center on the experience of becoming a mother and mothering in a cultural and linguistic environment that is not native to her and thus deal with issues such as the choice of language for mothering and negotiations around identity and subjectivity for the mothers and children alike.¹ Honest accounts of migrant mothers' experiences are hard to articulate and encounter greater difficulty in entering the public space because of their diversity, the fact that they are produced in different languages and literary and cultural traditions and expressed in texts that may be multilingual and/or translingual, not to mention the fact that migrant mothers themselves tend to be more disadvantaged and to have limited access to symbolic and literary spaces. Finally, where mainstream mothers' accounts of ambivalence tackle one patriarchal gender power regime—of their home country—migrant mothers find themselves negotiating their motherhood in relation to at least two and often several slightly different sets of patriarchal laws regulating motherhood.

Matrifocal and maternal narratives of mobility and migration have been around for a while but have struggled to attract the attention they deserve. In 2009, Emma Parker argued that "some of the most interesting and exciting writing

1. This description is inspired by Andrea O'Reilly's and Silvia Caporale-Bizzini's definition of matrifocal narrative: "Matrifocal is 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 3). Also important is Gill Rye's term "narratives of mothering": "Mothers' own narratives of mothering—literary texts where the mother is herself either the first-person narrative subject or, in third-person narratives, the figure whose point of view is paramount" (17).

published by women in English at the beginning of the 21st century is about, or grows out of, diaspora” (1). The same could be said of most other languages in the world, considering that with the rise of globalization, the internet, and digital technologies, members of different diasporas live their physical and creative lives in multiple languages and in increasingly transnational settings. We posit that a very significant part of that exciting diasporic writing by women explores the experience of motherhood and mothering in diasporic settings. For example, Jhumpa Lahiri is an important figure of American and world writing of Indian origin. Her novel *The Namesake* (2003) (adapted for screen in 2007) was a *New York Times* Notable Book and a *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize finalist. Her short story collection *Unaccustomed Earth* (2008) won the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, and her second novel, *The Lowland* (2013), was on the shortlist of both the Man Booker Prize and the National Book Award for Fiction. Lahiri’s oeuvre gives voice to mothers of Indian origin who bring up their children in the US. As Rehnuma Sazzad argues, her “writing is indeed a tribute to the Bengali mothers, whose courage and resolve dignify their painful adjustments to the uncharted norms and practices of America” (224). Another example is the British author of English Bangladeshi heritage, Monica Ali, and her phenomenally successful first novel *Brick Lane* (2003). In 2007 the novel was adapted into film; it has been translated into twenty-six languages, shortlisted for a number of prestigious awards, and as Sarah Knor notes, is “perhaps one of the best-known examples of British Asian writing” (163). The novel follows the life of a Bangladeshi bride and soon-to-be mother, Nazneen, who moves to the UK as a result of an arranged marriage. It is written entirely from Nazneen’s point of view and focalizes a migrant-mother character whose coming-to-agency is intrinsically linked to her maternal identity (Knor 166). In the context of Canadian English-language literature, one thinks of Japanese-Canadian writer Hiromi Goto. Her first novel, *Chorus of Mushrooms* (1994), now a modern classic, won the 1995 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize Best First Book (Canada and Caribbean Region) and was co-winner of the Canada-Japan Book Award. This novel explores the experience of immigrant mothers and cultural transmission through food and linguistic mothering practices, while in her other work, “Goto employs pregnancy as a metaphor for the diasporic state of Japanese Canadians” (Parker 3).

The uptick in narratives representing the point of view of migrant mothers is also traceable in contemporary women’s writing in other languages. A prime example of a major diasporic author exploring the intersection of mobility, migration, and the maternal in French-language writing is the Vietnamese-born Canadian writer Kim Thúy. Thúy’s debut novel *Ru* (2009) won the Governor General’s Award for French-language fiction in 2010 and was shortlisted for the 2012 Scotiabank Giller Prize. It was translated into English and won the 2015 edition of Canada Reads.² Thúy’s novels *Ru* and *Mãn* (2013) feature migrant mother characters who play crucial roles in positively shaping their children’s diasporic identities.³ Jocelyn Frelie argues that in *Ru*, the protagonist reconsiders

2. In archaic French, *Ru* means a rill or stream of water, blood, tears, or liquid. In Vietnamese, it means a lullaby.

3. The title *Mãn* is also a play in two languages, Vietnamese and English: it is the name of the main character, and it means fulfillment or that there may be nothing left to desire.

the maternal heritage of her refugee mother alongside becoming a mother herself. This allows the protagonist to travel in time, revisit and revise her ideas about motherhood, and build her own transdiasporic identity. When the protagonist of the novel becomes a mother,

she questions the models of mothering to which she had been exposed and parses out to what extent she hopes to reproduce or alter those models. This balance, between alteration of memory and reproduction of model, points to her fluid, maternal, transdiasporic identity. (148)

According to Alexandra Kurmann, fluidity and time travel make Thúy's work unique, and together these attributes constitute a poetics of "transdiasporic nomadism" (65). This special issue features an interview with Kim Thúy in which she speaks about her experience as a migrant mother and her coming-to-writing within that context.

In continental Europe, Franco-Moroccan Leïla Slimani "writes motherhood like no one else," according to Meena Kandasamy in the *New York Times*. Slimani's Goncourt Prize-winning novel *Chanson douce* (*Lullaby*) centers on the relationship between and the mothering practices of two mothers—a middle-class Parisian mother of Northern-African origin and her white French nanny. Among other things, the novel reflects on the inequality of mothers and the exploitative nature of care-work in the globalized world. In 2020 and 2022, Slimani published the first two parts of a trilogy based on her family heritage, *Le pays des autres* (*The Country of Others*) and *Regardez-nous danser* (*Watch Us Dance*), the main protagonist of which is based on Slimani's grandmother, Mathilde, a French woman from Alsace who married a Moroccan man and moved to Morocco to start a family. Kandasamy observes that Mathilde's subtle ambivalence toward her maternal role as a white French mother of mixed-race children in Morocco sheds new light on motherhood within a postcolonial context.

In terms of contemporary women's writing in Spanish and Catalan, two multilingual authors whose work is discussed in this volume stand out: the Beninese writer, Agnès Agboton, and Moroccan-Spanish writer, Najat El Hachmi. Both writers are currently based in Barcelona. El Hachmi is now well known in Spain and throughout Latin America due to her winning the Ramon Llull Award, the highest honor for Catalan literature, for her debut novel, *L'últim patriarca* (*The Last Patriarch*), while Agboton is considered an important figure in Afro-Spanish writing. For both writers, the significance of their work lies in its translingual and multilingual quality, which, as Anna C. Tybinko explains, is used to "challenge the proprietary experience of a Spanish readership" (3). Through the innovative and creative use of the full repertoire of their so-called mother tongues in their work as well as their experience of either being mothered by an immigrant mother or being one themselves, both writers offer remarkable representations of immigrant mothers in contemporary Spain.

Award-winning Italian writer of Senegalese origin, Igiaba Scego, is widely known as a representative of migrant writing within the Italian literary canon; her work

focuses, as Christopher Hogarth notes, on absent and overbearing birth and surrogate mothers, represented from both the point of view of a child and that of the mother (253). Emma Bond observes that in Scego's work, "the maternal figure is configured as a physical and metaphorical repository of identity and embodies the crucial ability to re-evoke the past for a successful negotiation of the present" (112). Again, transnational negotiations of belonging and identity through literary narrative seem to take place in relation to the mother who is invested with the task of successfully resolving the identity conflict.

What makes the themes of motherhood, mothering, and the maternal so compelling for contemporary women authors who write on mobility and migration? We suggest that it has to do with the specific cultural roles assigned to mothers within most cultures and collective imaginaries. In national discourses, mothers are often attributed the role of mother of the nation; they are entrusted with a long list of responsibilities and duties toward the nation. Maternal figures such as *Bhārat Mātā* ("Mother India"), Mother Ireland, *Matka Polka* ("Polish Mother"), and *La Mère Patrie* (a figure of a woman giving birth to a baby during the French Revolution), to mention but a few, are widely known national embodiments that are revered as personifications of those nations and discursively constructed to serve as role models for the actual mothers belonging to those national collectives. Furthermore, a family structure within which the mother is subordinate to the father and charged with the physical and symbolic reproduction of the nation, not least through instilling the mother tongue in her children, is another popular trope of nationhood (see Brinker-Gabler and Smith; Yuval-Davis).

Although national mother figures and their duties vary in line with the national historic and cultural heritage of specific nations and/or nation-states, they share some common characteristics. First, national imaginaries make women as mothers responsible for the physical work of producing the next generation of proud citizens. In this respect, they are symbolically conflated, Knor explains, with "the land which helps produce the subject just like the maternal body produces the baby" (40). Therefore, mothers are assumed to be naturally inclined toward engendering, gestating, giving birth to, and caring for children and are thus held accountable for literally producing the bodies that will perpetuate the existence of a particular nation. Such national expectations imposed on mothers have, in some cases, been enshrined in national laws or written into social policies, national awards, and medical practices, for example, those that legislate for or against abortion, dictate the length and conditions of maternity leave, and provide or deny access to maternity and social services designed, as Irene Gedalof puts it, to "discipline the reproductive" (*Narratives of Difference* 18). Moreover, these collective assumptions about the role and responsibilities of mothers extend to popular discourses, behaviors, and practices, where mothers who do not fulfil these implicit cultural expectations are subjected, in Jacqueline Rose's words, to "social punishment" (2).

Secondly, mothers are deemed responsible not only for producing and rearing children, especially sons (see Knor 9), but also for instilling national values in them. National identity narratives cast mothers in the roles of carers and educators responsible not only for physical reproduction but also for the cultural propagation of the nation. In other words, mothers are symbolically charged with mothering the nation and producing the right kind of citizens. The national maternal role thus tends to involve such duties as ensuring the children's familiarity with all forms of cultural heritage, including the national language, labeled the "mother" tongue. The national language is often conceptualized as the locus of the soul of the nation and is thus seen as an essential element of cultural heritage that should be passed on. Crucially, mothers are seen as responsible for their children's impeccable command of the national language as well as their performance of national customs and rituals, including adhering to the different gender regimes particular to specific national collectives. In the context of migration, mobility, displacement, and diaspora, national discourses put mothers in the difficult position of symbolically reproducing the nation in exile. Considering that migration often results from historical circumstances that mean endangerment of the future of the nation or ethnic group or culture in their home country, mothers in exile can find themselves under enormous pressure to maintain and pass on the national culture to their children. Conversely, as Rose notes, the dominant discourse of the receiving country often frames migrant mothers as "a threat to the nation's values and resources alike" (2018). Migrant mothers find themselves lodged uncomfortably between two competing national discourses and conflicting expectations; they are subjects out of place—both literally and figuratively—and are both troubled and troubling.

Finally, the association of mothers with the homeland (the motherland), the mother tongue, and the physical reproduction of the nation firmly locates them within the semantic field of the domestic. As Kate Averis and Isabel Hollis-Touré point out, "The topos that situate women in a fixed space is apparent in the language that we associate with place, roots, and identity: mother tongue, motherland, mother earth" (2). In the cultural imaginary, mothers are seen as static individuals responsible for looking after the home, creating stability, and providing care by staying put. Consequently, mothers have traditionally been associated with "home and stasis" (3). The home is the spatial boundary that contains the nation symbolically and discursively, confining the maternal to immobility and inertia. According to Gedalof, such logic imagines "reproduction-as-stasis" and associates the maternal body with community origins, positioning migrant "mother" as "place," as the purportedly pure space of home, in which tradition is preserved from outside contamination (*Taking (a) Place* 92-95).

Recent women's writing as well as scholarship on motherhood, mobility, and migration have vehemently resisted the simplistic association of migrant mothers with the nation, national values, and national languages. Most of all, contemporary women writers and feminist thinkers have challenged the symbolic confinement

of mothers to fixity and stasis. The purpose of this special issue is to explore how literary representations of motherhood, mothering, and the maternal in recent writing by women on mobility and migration help us to rethink motherhood and mothering in a globalized world through honest accounts of negotiations of motherhood in settings of mobility. The contributions to this special issue thus analyze how the mothering experience is negotiated within the structural power relations that privilege wealth, whiteness, monolingualism, the nuclear family, intensive mothering, and autonomy. How are the voices of migrant mothers, which are necessarily translingual, transcultural, transnational, and pluricultural, inscribed in literary texts in terms of plots, tropes, narrative structures, and literary conventions? As illustrated by individual essays in this special issue, contemporary women's writing on motherhood, mobility, and migration calls into question the gendered expectations traditionally placed on migrant mothers and on women more broadly.

Before delving into the contents of the different essays in this volume, let us consider new ways in which motherhood, mobility, and migration have been reconceptualized in recent feminist scholarship. As Chris Weedon points out,

writing by women who are from visible and racialized ethnic backgrounds developed in part as a result of a desire by first-generation postwar migrants and their children to give voice to a marginalized traumatic, and often hidden experience of emigration and settlement. (20)

Similarly, matrifocal and maternal narratives of mobility and migration have grown out of the need of first- and second-generation migrant women writers worldwide to give voice to experiences of motherhood and mothering—their own or those of their own mothers—which are sometimes starkly different from the dominant narratives of mothering that prevail in the host country. In so doing, these writers have challenged both literary conventions and the mainstream maternal script, producing a range of creative and innovative texts in the process.

Feminist literary scholars have long pointed out that women authors belonging to minority or migrant backgrounds tend to subvert the narrow confines of what Valerie Heffernan and Gay Wilgus label Western hegemonic, “culturally sanctioned modes of motherhood” (3), thus creating a discursive, symbolic, and narrative space for more nuanced and diverse representations of mothers, motherhood, mothering, and the maternal voice (see Hirsch; Ho; Journey and McPherson; Averis; Bond; Edwards *Multilingual Life Writing*; and Hogarth). Marianne Hirsch was one of the first to make that claim back in 1989, arguing that in the Western literary and cultural tradition defined by symbolic matricide, the maternal voice can only emerge in a cultural lineage that is “itself marginal and therefore perhaps more ready to bond with women—mothers and daughters—letting go of male, paternal, fraternal, or filial approval” (178). Hirsch identified the tradition of African-American women writers as this kind of symbolic space, in which “the painful experience of racist and sexist oppression” (178) can be articulated. Since

then, many such literary traditions, rooted in different cultural backgrounds and diasporas, have been identified, such as the Asian-American mother-daughter plot (see Ho), the maternal in Holocaust literature (see Kella, “Domestic Listening Across Generations”; and Ségeral, “Etrangères à elles-mêmes” and “(Re)Claiming Motherhood”), English- and French-language Vietnamese diasporic writing (see Kurman; Frelie), South-Asian diasporic fiction (see Knor), and second- and third-generation migrant writing in different European languages and literature (see Hogarth; Barkve), to mention just a few.

An important feature of contemporary migrant women’s writing across languages is the special attention it pays to maternal lineage, that is, the stories of mothers, grandmothers, and other foremothers, who have inhabited different worlds in different geographical locations and whose experiences of mothering have been steeped in different cultural institutions of motherhood and subjected to different patriarchal regimes. As Ashley Noel Mack observes, “examining motherhood as if there is a universal maternal subject who is oppressed by the institution of motherhood in homogenous ways is problematic” (11). Therefore, this volume looks at the different ways in which writers from migrant and/or minority backgrounds construct different narratives of migrant mothering in a contemporary globalized world as well as (re)writing the lives of the women whose stories had been handed to them through matrilineal traditions. In doing so, they highlight the culturally specific ways in which different intersecting strands of oppression have affected migrant women as mothers over the centuries. Importantly, they also re-imagine and re-examine the ways in which their foremothers may have resisted those patriarchal oppressions by calling on different narrative techniques that inscribe the voices of migrant mothers in the world literary canon.

Feminist scholarship on the literatures of motherhood, mobility, and migration has identified three important thematic strands, some of which are also explored by the essays featured in this special issue. These thematic strands are: (1) non-motherhood, (2) re-rooting homes, and (3) language and orality.

Non-Motherhood in Transnational Women’s Writing

Voluntary or involuntary, non-motherhood is still seen as an exceptional identity and subject position for women that still requires justification. Therefore, most research on literary representations of non-motherhood focuses on those reasons and defies the negative stereotypes attached to non-motherhood. In stories of women displaced through the Shoa, as Nathalie Ségeral argues, the reverberations of trauma “crystallized through issues of motherhood and infanticide” (“(Re)Claiming Motherhood” 112) echo in transnational women’s writing for generations. Ségeral analyses two literary representations of mothers who survive incarceration in Nazi death camps. In one story, Valentine Goby’s *Kinderzimmer* (2013; *Children’s Room*), the protagonist gives birth at the

Ravensbrück concentration camp: the baby is taken away from her, placed in the notorious *Kinderzimmer* that operated in that camp, and dies there. The other story she analyses, “Little Red Bird” (2004) by the Jewish-Canadian author Chava Rosenfarb, features an Auschwitz survivor who finds herself unable to have children and is tormented by the ghost of her 5-year-old daughter killed at the camp. In both cases, Ségeral argues, the children are portrayed as embodiments of trauma, yet in “Little Red Bird,” the experience of involuntary childlessness is cast as secondary Holocaust trauma. Together, both non-motherhood stories of Nazi death camp survivors imagine ways in which women resisted the gendered dehumanization of the Nazi regime directed at them. The protagonist of *Kinderzimmer*, Suzanne, adopts the baby of a dead inmate and brings him up as her own after the liberation. Paradoxically, Ségeral argues, the death of her own baby seeds desires in Suzanne to survive and to mother. However, in contrast to traditional representations of motherhood in Holocaust literature authored by men, where motherhood is seen “as the ultimate fulfillment and the last vestige of humanity” (123), Suzanne is portrayed as feeling no love or attachment to the baby she adopts. Thus *Kinderzimmer* resists idealized notions of motherhood, casting this mother–child relationship as a mutual survival strategy in the face of mass extermination. Rosenfarb’s novel presents the reader with another mother character that resists male Holocaust representations of motherhood. In an unwholesome, phantasmatic endeavor to become a mother as part of her dealing with Holocaust trauma, the protagonist, Manya, ends up stealing a baby from a maternity ward. Ségeral reads this episode as resistance to the male appropriation of female reproductive labor by assuming “the traditionally male role in literally appropriating another woman’s ‘reproductive labor’” (123). In sum, representations of non-motherhood following child loss in the Shoah take forms of resistance to both the specifically gendered violence against women of the Nazi regime and conventional patriarchal notions of motherhood.

The theme of non-motherhood following the Shoah in the work of transnational writers of the post-memory generation emerges as, Ségeral writes, a “decision to remain childless in order not to pass on the burden of trauma and post-memory” (“(Re)Claiming Motherhood” 123). The mother tongue is sometimes used as a metonym for motherhood, and the choice to not mother in a native language is a symbolic expression of voluntary non-motherhood. Both Cecile Wajsbrot and Hélène Cixous explore the notion of the mother tongue in their respective oeuvres. For those two authors, the mother tongue stands for a heritage language that is heavily charged with affect (see Ségeral, “Étrangères à elles-mêmes” 6). Ségeral points out that both authors express a sense of uprooting following the loss of German as a family language. Conversely, the rejection of German as a mother tongue offers liberation from the generational trauma, which in the case of Wajsbrot, extends to a rejection of motherhood. The refusal to mother in the mother tongue and/or to have children is a conscious decision to not transmit the traumatic memory of the genocide.

In terms of reasons for non-motherhood in the context of involuntary migration in early life, in “Deliberately Barren?” and *Voicing Voluntary Childlessness*, Nathalie Edwards focuses on two literary representations of non-motherhood by migrant French women writers, Linda Lê and Jane Sautière. Lê was born in 1963 in Vietnam to a French mother and a Vietnamese father. She moved to France with her mother as a war refugee in her teens, leaving her father behind. Lê grew up speaking French at home and had a French-language education before relocation. Sautière was born in Iran to French parents but grew up speaking Farsi to her nanny, to whom she was very close. She spent her childhood and adolescence entirely abroad, often relocating due to her father’s job. Edwards situates those narratives in the international sociocultural context in which non-motherhood by choice is negatively stereotyped with little attention paid to origins or migration experience. However, the first reason behind the narrators’ choice to not reproduce explored in both texts lies in their multiple losses due to involuntary relocations, such as the loss of homeland and father in Lê’s text entitled *À l’enfant que je n’aurais pas* (2011; *To the Child I Would not Have*) and the loss of Farsi, an emotionally charged mother tongue regardless of whether her biological mother spoke it, in Sautière’s narrative *Nullipare* (2008; *Childless*). The second reason for the childlessness of both narrators is their problematic relationships with their own mothers and their desire to avoid perpetuating an unhealthy filiation they themselves experienced. The narrator in Lê’s text feels it would have been irresponsible to have children, given her history of poor mental health, while the narrator in Sautière’s narrative alludes to her family history and to “these women who stopped wanting to give the world children, extenuated from History” (126). Edwards reads those texts as an attempt to voice some women’s desire to be childless and “to carve out female identity unshackled from reproduction” (“Deliberately Barren?” 28).

Together, these narratives defy the stereotypes implying that childless women are unfulfilled, incomplete, or unnatural, and that they are selfish or irresponsible. On the contrary, women who consciously choose non-motherhood do so after careful consideration and for reasons opposite to selfishness. They undertake and bear the loss that accompanies the rejection of motherhood in a cultural context that posits motherhood as womanhood’s most important function.

Rethinking Migrant Motherhood In Relation To Home

One important body of work in the area of motherhood, mobility, and migration sets out to rethink the concept of home in relation to migrant mothering by “highlighting the laborious effort that goes into uprooting and regrounding homes” (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier, and Sheller 1). This body of research focuses on and makes visible the physical, emotional, and mental effort that goes into resettling the family, ensuring its functioning in a transnational space and entailing labor

that is mostly carried out by migrant mothers, grandmothers, and other mother figures. This scholarly research emphasizes the idea that making or remaking home is primarily about creating and therefore represents the antithesis of static, inert, or stagnant. A key theorist of this line of thinking is feminist migration scholar Gedalof. In her influential article on conceptualizations of motherhood and migration, Gedalof points out that the gendered nature of thinking about migration and mobility obliterates the migrant maternal imaginary and prevents the telling of migrant mothers' stories:

We need to know how women construct migrant and transnational identities in the face of processes of displacement, non-belonging and isolation. But are we only hearing Odysseus' narrative of agency—still making the hero(ine) of migration narratives the uprooted, dislocated and solo actor remaking her identity in a new world? What about a migrant Penelope's story of emplacement, belonging, and connectedness? Can we unpick the complexities of her small stories to reveal another site in which identities are made? ("Birth, Belonging and Migrant Mothers" 97)

As this extract demonstrates, Gedalof is concerned with exploring the subjectivity and agency of maternal subjects whose mobility is always situated in the realm of care. She argues that the principal preoccupation of mobile maternal subjects is to produce stable homes and continuity amidst instability and disruption, a task that requires accepting changes to their conventional practices of mothering and homemaking. Furthermore, she posits the idea that for those migrant mothers, homemaking goes far beyond housekeeping and caring; instead, it amounts to producing conditions of multiple belongings, both conceptually and physically, through constant, minute, and complex negotiations of difference. Even simple tasks, such as cooking familiar foods, organizing familiar celebrations, or doing their own or their children's hair in familiar ways, always require creative rethinking due to the circumstances in which those familiar tasks are performed, lack of access to the correct ingredients and materials to perform the tasks, and so on. For Gedalof, then, the home-building that engages migrant mothers involves ongoing efforts, repeating and replicating the familiar, in order to hold on to what is recognized as stable, while facing a constant challenge to negotiate differences and come up with innovative ways of preserving the familiar in these new circumstances of caring and home-building.

In a similar vein, Kate Averis argues that home and migrant motherhood are far from being static and on the contrary generate a "dynamic space of growth and change" (7). She analyses Abba Farhoud's *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998; *Happiness has a Slippery Tail*), which focuses on an elderly, illiterate migrant mother of six, Dounia, who cannot speak either of the two official languages of her host country, Canada. Dounia is thus cut off from any form of social life and confined to the domestic space of childrearing and cooking. She is portrayed as suffering

from social marginalization, postnatal depression, and domestic violence, her deep loneliness caused by her lack of language and literacy skills. At the same time, Averis argues that what Dounia lacks in social relations, she compensates for in emotional intelligence and her bond with her children. The novel also depicts Dounia's relationships with her now-grown children and grandchildren, with whom she shares profound and embodied intimacy, deep mutual understanding, and emotional belonging. Dounia's husband, Salim, who in contrast to her is fluent in both English and French and enjoys a degree of social belonging through work, does not share these deep emotional relationships with his children and grandchildren. Paradoxically, Salim is portrayed at the end of the novel as more emotionally and culturally isolated than Dounia. In her reading of the text, Averis demonstrates that the novel imagines home as a space of meaningful cultural innovation, development, and integration, thus

unhinging belonging from proficiency in any national language, and demonstrating that language acquisition and the social cohesion that accompanies it come into effect when facilitated, not imposed, and, like many other historical processes, occur in intergenerational dynamics. (20)

Averis' interpretation of Farhoud's novel effectively demonstrates how migrant mothers can pave the way for their children's cultural as well as their own emotional belonging.

Language and Orality

Since migrant mothers often mother in a language other than the language of the host country, orality and inscription of the voice of a seemingly voiceless mother into a literary text are important concerns in transnational women's writing on motherhood, mobility, and migration. The figure of a daughter-writer emerges as instrumental in listening to, hearing, and transmitting the migrant mother's voice and story into the discursive and literary universe. In a reading of the same novel by Farhoud, *Le Bonheur à la queue glissante*, Eglé Kačkutė has previously suggested that it gives voice to a foreign, marginalized mother through a number of literary techniques. These include the choice of the first-person narrative voice in a French-language text given to a migrant mother who, it is explicitly mentioned, cannot speak French, a clever use of Arabic proverbs in French translation woven into the text, and a *mise en abyme* of a mother telling her story in Arabic to her French-language Québécoise daughter-writer who proceeds to make a novel out of it. Through these techniques, the novel manages to inscribe both the mother's and daughter's perspectives in a political way: "for the voices of some of the marginalized groups, including illiterate monolingual migrant mothers' voices to be heard, some women must know how to listen and how to translate them in ways that makes room for the unique voices of those silent women" (91).

In “Domestic Listening Across Generations” and “From Survivor to Im/migrant Motherhood and Beyond,” Elizabeth Kella argues that when the daughters of the post-memory generation listen to their mothers’ testimonies of the Holocaust, their listening amounts to emotional labor and care-work. Their subsequent memoirs give voice to those whose role it is to listen with empathy and relieve maternal suffering, but also tell their mothers’ stories. Kella asserts that Irene Oore’s mother “entrusted her bilingual daughter to make her personal story available to more people, if only to Stefa’s grandchildren” (620). Similarly, Natalie Edwards identifies a recent multilingual turn in life writing by French and Francophone women that, among other things, gives voice to some immigrant mothers of writer daughters. For example, Lydie Salvayre, in her Goncourt Prize-winning novel *Pas Pleurer* (2014; *Cry, Mother Spain*), tells the story of her mother’s involvement in the Spanish Civil War that led to her subsequent emigration to France where Salvayre was born. She interprets her mother’s speech from one language to another and represents both languages her mother spoke, Spanish and French, thus creating a hybrid grammar that allows Salvayre to articulate her mother’s bilingual subjectivity. To tell a particular episode of the Spanish Civil War, she uses her mother’s spoken testimony from the position of a multilingual interpreter of language, memory, history, and trauma in a boldly bilingual text. Edwards argues that the resurfacing and telling of those memories are partly to do with Salvayre’s mother’s age-related memory loss and her return to the language of her youth. However, such an artistic choice also points to a critique of monolingualism and a suggestion that it potentially erases important narratives in the dominant English-language public domains.

Finally, Angelita Reyes looks at representations of maternal figures in black women’s writing coming out of the US, the English- and French-speaking Caribbean, and Senegal, putting them in the historical context of slavery and the transcultural and transnational cultural maternal lineage. Reyes calls them “mother-women” to signify the collective maternal practice in the black community, where “if the natural mother is not able to provide, another will” (97). To her, the maternal lineage is about passing her attitudes toward life down the generations of women as opposed to wealth and material goods. Those attitudes include resistance to male and colonial domination as well as “resilience with which to deal with what has been thrown to them” (139); this lineage embraces their daughters’ best interests and provides support in defiance of patriarchal societal, family, and kinship laws. The most interesting iterations of this resistance occur in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). In both examples, mother figures enact revolt through self-destruction, which in turn means a symbolic return to the original homeland, their own country. In *Beloved*, the mother, Seth, kills her daughter in an attempt to save her from slavery. Seth’s prototype in history attempted collective suicide, killing her youngest daughter first, with the intention of going on to kill all of her children and herself. Rye convincingly argues that, in the context of slavery and the mythologic

imagination of enslaved people, mass suicide connotes the symbolic “flight” home. In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette’s surrogate mother, Christophine, “the obeah mother-woman” (101), cannot stop Mr Mason from taking Antoinette back to Europe with him. What she can do and does ensure is that in death (which Ryes reads as suicide), Antoinette is restored to the homeland in spirit. In both cases, the mother-women operate within the logic of care and protection through resistance. If they cannot ensure physical survival, they warrant a return to safety in spirit. In this sense, both mother figures are associated with homeland, the mythological neverland which, in this context, carries the connotation of self-consciousness, self-definition, and resistance.

Motherhood, Mobility, Migration in Twenty-First-Century Women’s Writing

This special issue opens with a fascinating interview with Vietnamese Canadian writer Kim Thúy, for whom issues of motherhood, mobility, and migration have proved central both to her personal life and to her fictional writing. Thúy shares some details of her relationship with her Vietnamese mother and discusses how that relationship impacted her own mothering practices. Thúy also underlines how the emotions and associations she has developed in relation to the various languages she speaks have fed into choices she has made about the languages in which she writes, speaks, and mothers. In particular, she explains how the Vietnamese language and culture still make their presence felt in her life-choices and in her writing. As a mother who has experienced the challenges faced by many migrant mothers who find themselves bringing up children in a language and a culture that differs from their language and culture of origin, Thúy’s work as a writer thus launches our explorations in this volume of literary and cultural representations of migrant motherhood by speaking directly to the questions of how she has grappled with these challenges and has embraced the creative and productive opportunities they bring.

Together, the essays in this special issue give voices to a range of gender-specific migrant experiences: motherhood exposes the specific inequalities migrant mothers and their children are subject to. The essays suggest that recent matrifocal and maternal narratives of mobility and migration expose what it is like to negotiate motherhood in a space where one is othered, racialized, exoticized, and discriminated against. The genre is an important forum in which multiple ecologies of belonging are posited, negotiated, and consolidated. Narratives of mothering across cultures and languages articulate how the proverbial Third Space is carved out with every gesture of maternal care. They demonstrate which elements of one cultural and linguistic space are being picked, prioritized, and cultivated, and which are discarded.

Two essays in this special issue deal with negotiating non-motherhood in contemporary transnational women’s writing in French. They both consider

(non)motherhood in relation to the issue of legitimacy: who is allowed the freedom of choice to reproduce or not. Mark Lee considers the refusal of motherhood as part of a quest for personal freedom in Shumona Sinha's writing, a choice that is met with intense questioning and violent physical punishment. If non-motherhood is broadly stigmatized, Lee's essay demonstrates that immigrant racialized women face another negative stereotype, namely an assumption that they will not integrate well in France unless they are mothers. He suggests that children are seen as giving migrant women a chance to lay roots in the host country, and failing to reproduce brings social punishment on migrant women. He thus indicates how childless women are portrayed as metaphorically *apatride* or "stateless" and "homeless." He further links this with a state of non-belonging that translingual women writers working in French find themselves having to negotiate. Jasmine Cooper's essay focuses on two novels that explore queer negotiations of (non)motherhood in relation to assisted reproductive technology (ART). Both essays demonstrate that, in contemporary France, motherhood offers a sense of legitimate subjectivity, a rooted selfhood with prospects of belonging. However, the diversity of the characters in the texts analyzed, as well as the imaginative and subversive approaches they take to motherhood, expose the migrant experience in France and carve out discursive spaces for queer or straight non-motherhood as legitimate identities for women as well as other forms of desired motherhood.

The following two essays by Marit Barkve and Julia Utiger investigate how migrant women's experiences have been represented in two quite different diasporic contexts. Barkve looks at a Norwegian diasporic family novel and the ways in which it subverts negative motherhood tropes. First, it breaks away from a stereotypical representation of immigrant mothers as mere reproducers of violent patriarchal cultures in the host country and as exploiting Norway's social benefit system. Second, it resists a colonizing, Orientalizing, and exoticizing image of a young immigrant woman who rejects her culture to integrate in Norway and adopt Norwegian ways in a Nora-like feminist gesture. Finally, the novel carves out a third way of sorts in which it becomes possible for an immigrant woman to not fully identify as Norwegian and yet enjoy a sense of belonging in Norway as an ethnic subject. Utiger considers a diasporic space in Southern Europe. She examines how two authors of African descent—from Morocco and Benin—build symbolic textual spaces of maternal citizenship in which their children's hybrid identities and their own are created and discussed. Their textual migrant maternal reproductive sphere produces public spaces where multiple ecologies of belonging may be possible. The essay demonstrates that mothering is a practice of identity production, while mothering in the context of migration is a public production of identity with a difference.

Núria Codina Solà and Eglè Kačkutė consider, in their essays, some ways in which the voice and the perspective of the marginalized migrant mother who does not have any voice in the language of the host country are inscribed and linguistic relationships between foreign-language mothers and their children are negotiated.

Codina Solà looks at the “linguistic and narrative polyphony” of Najat El Hachmi’s literary work to decipher the perspective and the story of diverse maternal subject positions of a mother who is also an oppressed wife, an empowered single mother, and a daughter who rejects motherhood. Similarly, Kačkutė’s essay focuses on the linguistic relationships of migrant mothers who, against the national injunction of their native national cultures, mother their children in the language of the host country. Kačkutė reads the silence of those mothers in their native language as imposed choices as they navigate a number of vulnerabilities which migrant mothers from the Baltic were subjected to in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In sum, this special issue contributes to our understanding of motherhood in a contemporary globalized world by shedding light on what often falls outside the Western discourses of motherhood and mothering, thus offering fresh ways of imagining and living motherhood that are agential, empowered, and relational.

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