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Sexing Slavery, the Holocaust, and Madness

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**Sexing Slavery,
the Holocaust,
and Madness**

Wars, and hence the memories of wars, are owned by the male of the species. And fascism is a decidedly male property, whether you were for or against it. Besides, women have no past, or aren't supposed to have one. A man can have an interesting past, a woman only an indecent one. And my stories aren't even sexy.

–Ruth Klüger, *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered*, p. 18

[Beloved's] heroine would represent the unapologetic acceptance of shame and terror; assume the consequences of choosing infanticide; claim her own freedom. The terrain, slavery, was formidable and pathless. To invite readers (and myself) into the repellant landscape (hidden, but not completely; deliberately buried, but not forgotten) was to pitch a tent in a cemetery inhabited by highly vocal ghosts.

–Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, p. xi

*Hôpital ou camp de concentration*¹?

–Leonora Carrington, *En Bas*, p. 35

*C'est difficile d'annoncer à quelqu'un, comme ça, tout d'un coup, qu'il est passé de l'autre côté. Qu'à partir de maintenant, il ne sera plus comme les autres. Qu'il portera pour toujours la marque des aliénés comme les esclaves d'antan portaient leur tatouage*²

–Emma Santos, *L'itinéraire psychiatrique*, p. 18

HOW DOES a woman writer memorialize her own traumatic history, when it happens to be part of a larger history dominated by male narratives (as far as the Holocaust and slavery go), or when it is altogether silenced (as is the case for madness and psychiatric hospitalization)? My dissertation is an interdisciplinary project that tries to answer these questions by applying comparative memory studies to the gendering of trauma in contemporary historical and (auto)fictional narratives. It is entitled “Reclaimed Experience: Gendering Trauma in Slavery, Holocaust, and Madness Narratives” and includes eight Francophone, Germanophone, and Anglophone women writers.

Following Michael Rothberg's concept of “multidirectional memory,”³ which demonstrates how marginalized collective memories interact productively instead of competing with one another, I am reading in concert Caribbean and African-American women writing about slavery (Maryse Condé and Toni Morrison), Jewish women writing about the Holocaust (Ruth Klüger, Sarah Kofman, and Cécile Wajsbrot), and (formerly) mad women writing about madness (Leonora Carrington, Emma Santos, and Unica Zürn). The common point among these female authors lies in their double marginalization: as women, they are part of a “minority” within a minority (the mentally ill,



Self-Portrait by Leonora Carrington

the postcolonial/Black subject, the Jew), thus being dominated subjects in history.

So far, the commonality between women's writings of slavery and of the Holocaust has barely been touched upon, and their potential kinship with writings by mad women has not been studied at all. And yet, these authors resort to a set of shared tropes, in order to reclaim their stories, whereby literature becomes a means to moving beyond victimology: a deconstruction of "motherhood" through ghosts, infanticidal mothers, distorted lineages, and the intertextuality of rewritten fairy tales, which are used – albeit in different ways – by all of them, so as to debunk myths held by male narratives about "femininity."

Besides Rothberg's multidirectional memory, the main theoretical framework for my dissertation is Cathy Caruth's trauma theory, black feminist studies, Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" and the feminine/feminist trans-generational transmission of trauma. A close study of how the memory of the traumatic past becomes literature in these eight texts serves to emphasize the "echo chamber" created by the circulation of recurring tropes among texts dealing with different time periods and different types of traumas, and establishes a conversation among these writers. The literary use of this echo chamber allows for a pivotal shift from passivity to agency and enables these female authors to reclaim⁴ their experiences, while giving rise to a

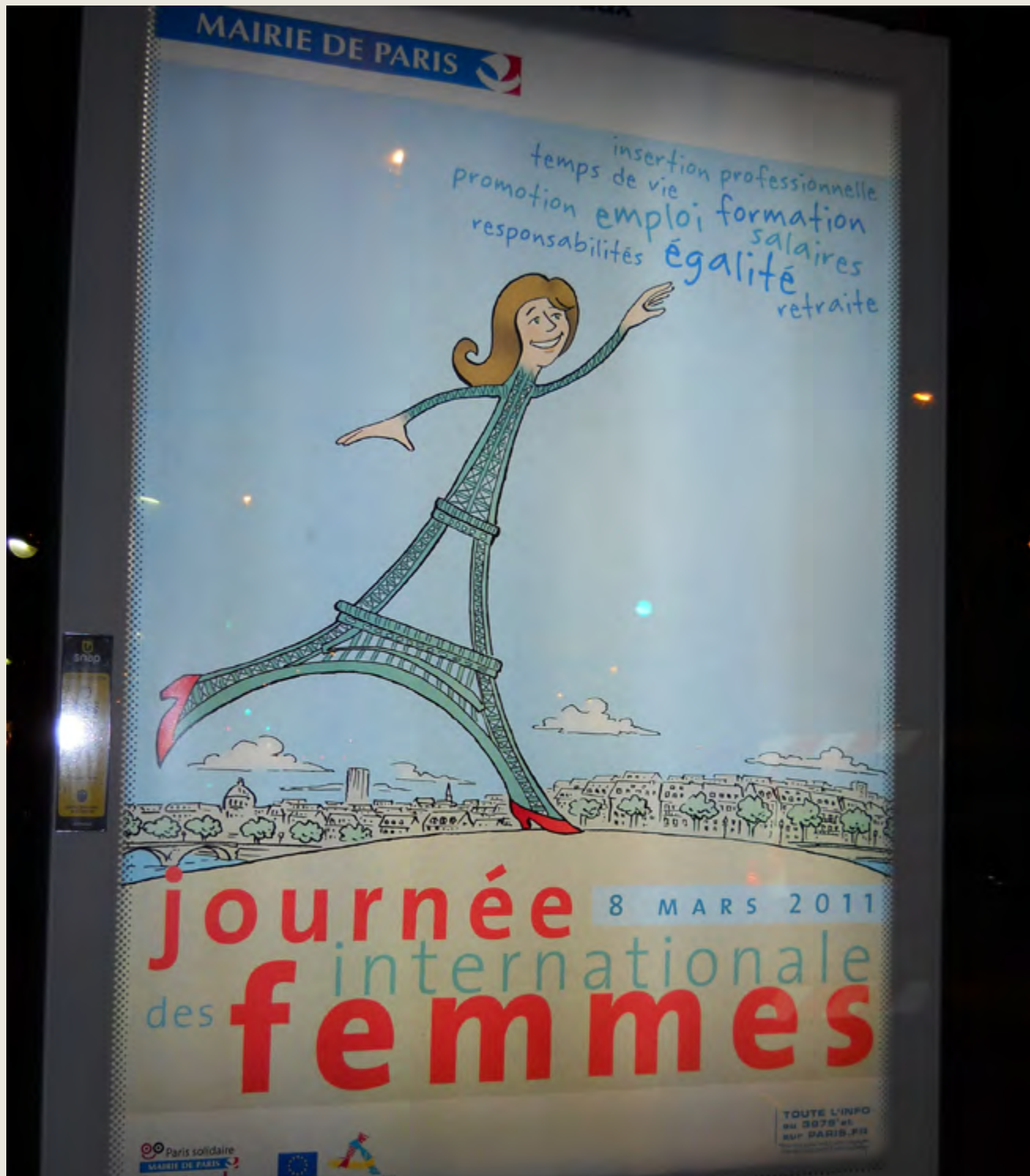
transnational literary voice of the gendering of trauma, in keeping with Rothberg's ideal of a "shared memory." Ultimately, this project's aim is to create a multidirectional feminist trauma theory.

Thus, the guiding thread of this study is two-fold: on the one hand, I am exploring the similarities among literary depictions of the concentrationary space, the space of the plantation, and the space of the psychiatric hospital. Namely, these narratives bear striking resemblance in relation to metaphors of imprisonment, alienation, and dis-possession of one's story. Carrington, Santos, and Zürn all use recurring allusions to concentration camps when writing about their experience in the psychiatric hospital.

On the other hand, my work investigates the sexed subjectivity of these trauma narratives through a set of recurring tropes pertaining to the blurring of gender boundaries. One of these pervasive tropes is the literary figure of the "bad" mother—be it the infanticidal mother or the childless woman—both as an embodiment of trauma and as the means to overcoming it. In the process of re-appropriating the traumatic history they have inherited or experienced firsthand, these writers all feel the need to deconstruct the notion of "motherhood," as well as to subvert traditional gender roles and boundaries, and traditional lineages, thanks to the *mise en*



**Institut mémoires de l'édition
contemporaine, Abbaye d'Ardenne,
Caen, Normandy**



abyme of rewritten fairy tales and to the centrality of ghosts and of various spectral metaphors.

Thus, following Rothberg's conception of multidirectional memory as an echo chamber, where histories are understood as related to each other, my goal is to demonstrate that a comparative study of texts dealing with different types of traumas (slavery, the Holocaust, madness, and psychiatric institutionalization) and written by women, allows for new insights into the literary devices used by these authors so as to re-embody their story, which they feel has been silenced or erased from history books. If multidirectional memory emphasizes trauma as a link between cultures, it can consequently be furthered by being applied to gender and feminist studies, and extended to a realm of literature located outside of history, and yet, anchored in it: the writing of madness.

My current research interests are the result of a thinking process that started several years before entering the doctoral program. After completing undergraduate studies in philosophy and English literature in France, I was given the opportunity to teach French for a year in Christchurch, New Zealand, in a public boys' high school and in a private girls' high school. My choice of going there sprang from an interest in Janet Frame, a New Zealand writer who was wrongly diagnosed with schizophrenia and subsequently spent eight years in a psychiatric hospital in the 1960s. I was given access to some of her personal papers—in-

Listening to these Holocaust survivors was an extremely moving experience, and this is when I began to notice differences between male and female narratives of experienced trauma, as well as common points and recurring issues in narratives of Holocaust, slavery, and madness by women.

cluding letters in which she discusses her mental issues—that have not been published—and was also able to read some of her correspondence and papers at the Frame Literary Trust.

After coming back from New Zealand, I attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee as an exchange student from the Université Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle. I ended up staying for a second year at UWM, where I received an M.A. in Comparative Literature, during the course of which I started drawing some comparisons between women's writings of madness and women's writings of slavery. I then went on to enter the doctoral program in French and Francophone Studies at UCLA and, simultaneously, started to take part in a program called "Bearing Witness," which collects Holocaust survivors' testimonies for a database. For several weeks, I went to the UCLA Hillel Center once a week and had lunch with a Holocaust survivor who told me his story of struggle and survival from the Lodz ghetto to Auschwitz to Los Angeles. Listening to these Holocaust survivors was an extremely moving experience, and it was during these sessions that I began to notice differences between male and female narratives of experienced trauma, as well as common points and recurring issues in women's narratives of the Holocaust, slavery, and madness.

Over the course of my graduate studies at UCLA, I have been very lucky to receive various

fellowships, which have enabled me to conduct archival research both in France (at the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine in Caen and at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris) and in Berlin (at the Jüdisches Museum and at the Staatsbibliothek). Thanks to a UCLA/Mellon Fellowship on Holocaust Studies in American and World Cultures and to a Mellon Pre-Dissertation Fellowship, I was able to spend two summers in Berlin, where I accessed Holocaust archives at the Jewish Museum, as well as Unica Zürn's personal papers at the Potsdamer Straße branch of the Staatsbibliothek.⁵ The Staatsbibliothek also happens to hold the most important resources on Jewish literature in Europe. In the meantime, I also took classes at the Berlin Goethe Institut, so as to improve my German language skills and become better able to read the German authors included in my dissertation in the original version. This research proved essential to the second and third parts of my dissertation, which respectively deal with the gendering of Holocaust trauma and tropes of "female madness."

For the past two academic years, I have also been receiving a fellowship (*bourse d'accueil*) from the École Normale Supérieure-Ulm, in Paris (through a partnership with my home department), which provides me with lodgings while carrying out research at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. I would also like to thank the

UCLA Center for the Study of Women for awarding me the Irving and Jean Stone Dissertation Year Fellowship, which is currently enabling me to complete my dissertation in ideal conditions.

Nathalie Ségeral is a doctoral candidate in the department of French and Francophone Studies at UCLA, and the recipient of a 2011-2012 CSW Irving and Jean Stone Dissertation Year Fellowship. Her dissertation is entitled "Reclaimed Experience: Gendering Trauma in Slavery, Holocaust, and Madness Narratives."

Photo credits: Photo on page 16 shows the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin. All photos are courtesy of the author.

NOTES

- 1."A hospital or a concentration camp?" (my translation).
- 2."It's hard to suddenly break the news to somebody that, all of a sudden, they have gone through the other side. That, from now on, he/she will never be like other people. That he/she will always wear the mark of madness, just like slaves used to be tattooed" (my translation).
- 3.Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- 4.By using the phrase "to reclaim one's experience," I am paraphrasing trauma theorist Cathy Caruth's article "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History," *Yale French Studies* 79 (1991): 181-192.
- 5.Unica Zürn was a German surrealist painter and writer, who suffered from schizophrenia, spent time at Berlin-Wittenau – Berlin's main psychiatric hospital, and committed suicide in 1970 in Paris.

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