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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? FEMINIST MEMOIR WRITING

Lynne Segal

‘This is not a memoir’ is the opening sentence of my book, *Making Trouble!* Oh yes it is, my publishers said, fully aware that in recent years it is books packaged as memoir, which, as they like to say, ‘shift units’. ‘This Is Not About me’, the Scottish novelist, Janice Galloway calls the childhood memoir she has just published, knowing that childhood is, precisely, all about those people and things around you, implanting themselves, being implanted, upon you. Galloway evokes the narratives engulfing her on reaching puberty: ‘I was turning into a moody cow like Aunt Kitty. If I didn’t get a grip, I’d be a cheeky bitch, like [older sister] Cora before I knew what had happened. I wouldn’t trust me to behave at all’. (We know that story.) However, I had many other reasons, besides childhood’s porousness, to be wary of the ‘memoir’ label tagged to *Making Trouble*, in which I wanted, primarily, to think about recent feminist history from the joyful rebirth of ‘women’s liberation’, now some four decades ago, right up to the present moment. I wanted, for instance, to suggest how strange is so much seen as feminism’s contentious afterlife: for instance, think of those three women in the FTSE 100 index of top executives earning over three million each last year. Has feminism failed because there are still *only* three women up there? Or has feminism, once so preoccupied with issues of equality, failed because some women aspire to earn such obscene salaries, several million times more than the majority of women globally took home last year. (And I am not going to dwell upon any animals ‘with lipstick’, aquatic or agrarian, although the contradictions of Sarah Palin, when she stood for the vice presidency of the USA in 2008, with her explicitly anti-feminist stances, are also part of feminism’s ambiguous afterlife.

What makes feminist legacies so contentious? As different ‘generations’, those waves, as many like to depict them, kept on rolling in, rolling over, what went before, one so fast upon another. *Making Trouble* was hardly ‘my’ story, as one expendable cog on a journey, or at least moving along some crevice of the

journeys, I was exploring. Of course, I was once again probing issues I've addressed often enough before, though this time in a less theoretical, more personal voice, mapping out my own engagement in, distance from, the particular patterns, conflicts, alliances and misalliances, of that movement quickly labelled '2nd-wave feminism'. It was, as most of you'll know, a movement that later veered off into a jumble of popular and academic feminisms, multiplying and dividing, as movements do (its offshoots battling with each other, soon seemingly far distant from their original roots). One branch contained the vast diversity of grass-roots campaigning, whether workplace or community based, alongside policy reform initiatives, and much more. Another branch, first moulding while sharing common experiences *as* women; later, *if* entering scholarly domains, often embracing Derridean or Foucauldian deconstructions of 'experience', while soon questioning the meaning of 'gender', 'sexuality', indeed, *any* notion of 'identity' at all, as always – to borrow Judith Butler's influential framings – contingent, provisional, illusory, 'performative', at the very least, permanently problematic. Putting myself in the frame, then, I was exploring how ideas, especially those political ideas that influence our lives, arise, mutate, then often fade away before our very eyes, though we may struggle, as best we can, to keep a hold on them. Even our own memories are not safe from the re-writings of history, as Walter Benjamin once said, though in somewhat different words and a very different context.¹ This thought is expressed in the old Soviet joke I kept hearing till recently: 'The future is certain, it is only the past that is unpredictable'.² (The joke's disappeared suddenly, however, since right now, following the financial crisis begun in 2008, even the future is looking just a little less certain, though sadly not through any actions we've chosen.)

MEMORY VERSUS HISTORY

Anyway, my resistance to the memoir packaging for my own reflections on the reverberations of feminism went beyond knowledge of the extreme unreliability of the 'truth telling' of personal memory. There is, obviously, a difference between memory and history, even though this distinction has been increasingly probed and problematised of late. Despite the current fascination, even obsession, with memory over the last two decades, it is seen, correctly, as a fragile thing, vulnerable to all the illusions

and self-deceptions, conscious and unconscious, that constitutes our mental life, as well as our inherently unstable, selective, always imperfect, conscious cognitive processes of recall: no memory without forgetfulness, no forgetfulness without memory, could be today's mantra. Moreover, we know we can only reproduce our experiences via regurgitated words, along familiar – all-too-familiar – 'narrative' tracks. Although, and this is the point of the *political* memoir, in certain contexts, certain times and places, we sometimes join with others doggedly determined to seek out what we see as radically 'new' ways of collectively re-shaping/re-positioning our experiences as, in my own ruminations, many women did, quite determined to produce new stories about our pasts, to dream different futures for ourselves than those already on offer. Still, individual *or* collective, strictly personal *or* political, memory remains suspect and partial, with only the few, furthermore, given the opportunity to narrate their memories in published texts. Who do you think *you* are? one may well ask, daring to represent the experiences of others, to stand on that rock of the 'we', knowing there could always be different voices, neither heard nor reported, in public processes of retrieval? Moreover, even as we try to keep a grip on our own past, seemingly replaying that same old tape, memories mutate, polishing themselves up, shedding stuff, responsive to provocations and suspicions in the temporal imaginings of the present.

But then again, if the workings of memory are selective and fallible, history itself is also an object of contention. Certainly, there are historians who affirm the old traditions, one of the most powerful and persistent voices wanting to fortify the borders of history against the surge of cultural interest in memory in recent years being that of the eminent historian, Eric Hobsbawm: 'The past, both private and collective', he likes to affirm, 'is another country, the attempt to reach it by the slippery and unreliable tracks of memory *must* fail.'³ However, indefatigable historian that he is, Hobsbawm is sometimes at odds with himself, and quite rightly rather fond of his own memories:

Historians of my age are guides to that crucial patch of the past, that other country where they did things differently, because we have lived there ... we know what it felt like, and this gives us a natural immunity to the anachronisms of those who were not there.⁴

Here I would actually be more cautious than he, suggesting this gives us, perhaps, a partial immunity. It is, as Hobsbawm usually likes to emphasise, not that memory is reliable, far from it. Nevertheless, simply ‘being there,’ provides us with associations that may help to resist the imposition of new orthodoxies onto the past. This is just what early sections of Hobsbawm’s own memoir, *Interesting Times*, manage to do. His early memories even help us, or certainly me, understand why, in the face of near ubiquitous incomprehension today, he could have remained a loyal Party man till the final winding up of the British Communist Party, in 1991, *despite* the failure of the communist dream *either* to put an end to class exploitation *or* to halt western imperial aggression, *despite*, above all, revelations of the catastrophic slaughters of Stalin. In the face of all this, Hobsbawm’s memoir illuminates something about his stubborn allegiance to that Party he decided to join, back in the 1930s, in Berlin, on entering adolescence as a newly orphaned, Jewish teenager, suddenly all alone with an even younger sister, just as Hitler was elected to power. For him then, as for so many others at the time: ‘The October revolution represented the hope [the *only* hope] of the world’. The shock of that moment, he says, never left him. Looking back at that ‘remote and unfamiliar child’, some eighty years later, the elderly historian reflects: ‘had he lived in other historical circumstances nobody would have forecast a future of passionate commitment to politics’. However, for a clever, brooding Jewish boy, at that time, in that place, ‘political innocence was impossible’.⁵

Thus, even those wishing to exclude the slipperiness of personal experience from the greater certainties of historical excavation cannot escape the significance of what Bill Schwarz summarises as ‘the irreducibly human dimensions of historical reality’.⁶ Moreover, at least since the 1980s, historiographers have been pointing out that historical knowledge also, not so unlike memory work, is best seen as a provisional, always fallible reconstruction of the past, one also mediated through the discursive landscapes of the present. It has its own truth problems, as Hayden White pointed out some forty years ago, and Joan Scott, among others, argues passionately today, attempting to open doors to phenomena we have not noticed

before about the past, directing us always to read backwards anew, but differently.⁷ In noting this, we are more likely to look out for those emancipatory re-constructions of memory that might begin to merge with the critical re-thinkings of history. We see such processes fusing, for instance, in recent historical reflection on the significance of what is now called the ‘politics of recognition’. Writing on the links between history and memory, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty talks of ‘historical wounds’ to refer to contemporary recognition of the lasting (though not necessarily permanent) effects of the indignities and destruction inflicted by one group of people upon another, as in the devastations settler colonies brought to the indigenous populations of Australia, New Zealand, or across the American continent, only yesterday, or the continuing wreckage in Israel’s occupied territory today. Chakrabarty uses Australia’s recent public acceptance of the notion of the ‘stolen generations’, to symbolise the Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents by government agencies, as an example of what he means by ‘historical wounds’. Such reconstructions of memory are dialogically formed, only possible, once there is at least some level of formal acknowledgement, however partial and grudging, by those responsible for the injustices of the past within official history writing: ‘Historical wounds are thus dialogically formed, dependent as they are on acknowledgment from groups seen as the givers of the wound in the first place’.⁸ Equally, people’s moments of triumph will fall prey to practices of forgetting, without at least some continuing acknowledgement, however suspicious, of shared historical accounting.

SHIFTING CONTEXTS OF SELF-NARRATION

Thus any tales of just how we become that person who narrates their own story, all have their own grander histories. This is something Bruce Robbins, as many of you will know, compellingly illustrates in his timely book, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, pointing to the suppressed role of state welfare interventions in the upward mobility narratives he explores, despite the deceptive disdain their authors usually display for any notions of dependency.⁹ Of course, the nature and history of autobiographical narrative is itself now a vibrant field of study, for the light it sheds on shifting tales of human subjectivity. Thus Carolyn Steedman, for instance, traces back the origins of self-narration in Britain to the late

seventeenth century, when the labouring poor were compelled by the newly-emerging administrative state to give an account of themselves, detailing their working histories, and sexual lives, before receiving any form of poor relief, or perhaps, to forestall imprisonment, deportation or a public hanging. Steedman sees the basic structures of modern literary biographies laid down in these early enforced narratives, inevitably stories of suffering, loss, exile, exploitation, rape, betrayal, written down by someone else.¹⁰ Those who did voluntarily tell their life stories back in the seventeenth century, Kate Hodgkin argues, usually presented them in the form of spiritual quests. In these early modern autobiographies the life story is not so much one of the fashioning of a self, but rather of transcending it, on a pathway to spirituality and Godliness: 'you tell your story with a sense that it is not yours, it belongs to a group and a moment'. Here, the essential ingredients of contemporary life stories – parents, marriage, children, even childhood – often barely rate a mention: the 'crucial drama of selfhood' is one's closeness to God, with other people important only to the extent that they assist, or hinder *that* journey.¹¹ Our own notions of psychological interiority, as Steedman suggests in her further delvings into subjectivity, emerged from the new understandings of 'childhood' that developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The modern emphasis on childhood's centrality to personhood was reflected and instilled, above all, with the impact of psychoanalytic thought on the 20th century. As a result, Steedman writes, 'the vast historicized world was turned inside,' as the differing effects of time and place were put aside, for a focus instead on that 'timeless place within'.¹²

Yet, that 'timeless place within' is of course an illusion. 'Even our most personal stories are always a far broader cultural and political affair', Adam Phillips comments, after noting the remarkable absence, until rather recently, of any sense of place in his own memories of growing up in Wales. This makes them, he concludes, narratives that are 'often in need of new translations'.¹³ That is true. However, as I have already suggested, new translations can also distort as well as regenerate living memories, even threatening to bury what was thought their main significance, when the past is read through the framings of the present. Ah, the framings of the present! Now that the feminist and sexual warriors I once knew are

themselves older women, we face the reverberations of what is everywhere registered as more individualistic, defensive, war-torn times. Moreover, older feminists see the marketable aspects of what were once oppositional challenges selectively incorporated into new orthodoxies, even as notions that still contest it are thrust abruptly aside, or amended.

Thus, controversy surrounds the memoir genre at every turn. On the one hand, memoirs have never been more popular, especially the type that tells a story of personal-survival-against-all-odds, with its best-selling offshoot nowadays dismissively called the ‘misery memoir’ (Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes* is emblematic of the genre, Anne Enright’s *The Gathering*, a more knowing fictionalized update).¹⁴ Today, we are *all* positively encouraged to narrate our personal histories, though this was not always so, not even in my lifetime. In the 1950s, as Edmund White recalls, people felt ‘a certain contempt for autobiographical fiction’, and some, of course, still do.¹⁵ The cultural outlook of those countries caught up in the staging and catastrophic outcome of World War II (the skeletal shadows surviving Hitler’s death camps, the firebombing of German cities, the nuclear fall-out of Hiroshima) was, for a while, don’t look back. However, on Western horizons nowadays, many shifts have encouraged the turn to autobiographical narration, not least the cultural impact of feminism itself, with its emphasis on personal life. Most significantly, the various new challenges to traditional social conventions and political outlooks, whether troubling gender identities, family life, careers, all form part of a landscape in which it is individuals, alone, expected to stand in for social life generally. Thus, writing of what they term the new ‘individualization’, sociologists such as Ulrich Beck or Zygmunt Bauman, insist that, at least in the Anglo-American world, we are ubiquitously commanded to seek only individual solutions even for the most universal social problems: driven throughout our lives to work at becoming, and remaining, discrete individuals.¹⁶ Neatly mocking this Zeitgeist, **instructing us to seek only individual solutions for universal problems, Woody Allen is somewhere or other, though I know not where, said to have proposed a course in ethics: ‘[Kant’s] categorical imperative, [and] six ways to make it work for you’.**

Appropriately, autobiographical services and courses to facilitate self-disclosure are blooming (along with creative writing courses generally). But here is the critical point, from the closing decades of the twentieth century, self-narration has tended to conform to a *Zeitgeist* largely disdainful of *any* broader analysis of the social and economic underpinnings of selfhood. Yes, it is true that feminism may have helped *authorise* the interest in the personal domain, but it did so in ways that specifically embraced, rather than dismissed, the dense cultural and material underpinnings of women's consciousness. Its practice was in line with that of other social movements emerging out of 1960s, which in the wake of the New Left, in Britain, including E.P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, emphasised the political significance of deliberate cultural contestation in considering the lives of subjugated peoples and classes. As we know, this outlook was the theoretical foundation of Cultural Studies, first taking root in its Centre in Birmingham, and in the beginning, though not for long, busy delving into the subcultures of the working class, surveying its forms of class resistance and survival.¹⁷

POLITICS OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING

It was just such vigorous insertion of personal lives into the political sphere that was for a while the hallmark of 1970's women's liberation, epitomised in Sheila Rowbotham's classic text *Women's Consciousness, Man's World* (1973), and triggering such slogans as 'the personal is political', with women's rethinking of the everyday as both personal and political.¹⁸ This form of feminist consciousness-raising, or consciousness moving (as some now prefer to say), soon inspired the cultural flowering of women's autobiographical/semi-autobiographical fiction, offering up its own genre of utopian fiction, mapping women's journeys out of the paradoxes and perils facing women coming of age in the 1960s, into a new form of release via the solidarity and support of other women. In diverse texts, the female protagonists emerged from the constraints and frequent humiliations, if not harms, of girlhood, usually navigating the promise and disappointments of marriage, often surviving a secluded, lonely motherhood (commonly in the company of demanding and difficult men), to arrive at some form of redemptive liberation through personal honesty, growing autonomy and confidence, always helped by the

understanding and support of other women – not infrequently, at least if still heterosexual, ending their voyage standing alone, but always wiser, always just a little more hopeful. Sometimes these texts were international bestsellers, especially when emanating from the USA. You’ll know them: just a few of the instant classics of the genre including Alix Kates Shulman’s *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen* (1972), Lisa Alther’s *Kinflicks* (1976), Rita Mae Brown’s *Ruby Fruit Jungle* (1977), Marilyn French’s *The Women’s Room* (1978). However, by the 1990s, these feminist voyages of discovery had long since disappeared, along with the radical movements that generated them.¹⁹

Certainly, by the close of the twentieth century, the confessional novels now flooding the market were, as I’ve already suggested, no longer journeys of shared hope, embarked upon with others in pursuit of collective goals, but rather narrated tales of individual triumph over trauma. The starting point is regularly the recognition of childhood damage, the journey one of individual transcendence, largely unaided by others, except perhaps by the wise counsel of some professional help. Those already periodising the 1990s today, have summed up that decade in terms of its extraordinary flowering of cultural obsession with trauma, everywhere encouraging the *cri de coeur* of the ‘talking wounded’, detailing uniquely gruesome tales, whether of sexual abuse, personal injury, parental loss, or the living of one’s premature dying.²⁰ With the dawning of the twenty-first century, an exhibition assembled by the Hayward Gallery in London, hosting the artworks of twelve leading international artists, began traveling the major art galleries of Britain – its title, simply, *Trauma*.

Clearly, the contemporary mapping of individual suffering was already a world away from the cadence of the 1970s, or at least that sounded by the young women warriors who had looked towards a Left, usually libertarian, politics, and to each other, to move beyond what we had quickly diagnosed as our *shared*, rather than unique or *individual*, personal woes. Disdaining the Fifties’ post-war settlements accepted by our own often visibly depressed, or mildly, if not acutely, resentful mothers, newly emerging feminists, including myself, had sought collective solutions for what we diagnosed as shared female afflictions. The

quixotic catchphrases capturing the spirit of those years, ‘End Sexual Misery and Exploitation’, ‘Solidarity with Our Sisters’, expressed solidarity, above all, for women in the most precarious situations, whether homeless, in prisons, in mental hospitals, for just that woman, who could be glimpsed, as she ‘inches along the rim of the world, always about to go over’, as greeted by one of our former favourite songwriters, the already ageing, Malvina Reynolds.

Reflecting back on the ‘cultures of feminism’ some twenty years ago in a Britain still ruled by Margaret Thatcher, the feminist literary scholar Cora Kaplan suggested that in ‘a cheerless political moment’, it is important to recall the ‘productive optimism’ of the past.²¹ Well, yes; although this becomes just a little harder, however, as that ‘cheerless moment’, the present, seems to last a very long time: a time when our neo-liberal future seemed to become only ever more certain (although in Britain for over ten years now, under a Labour government). When Kaplan’s words on the need to recall moments of ‘productive optimism’ were published, in *Sea Changes* in 1986, she was evoking a period then still rather recent, when the dominant feminist trajectory, at least in the UK, aligned itself, as if naturally, with socialism. Wollstonecraft, Marx and Freud were, all of a sudden, on cosy terms in the discourses of socialist feminism. When Kaplan glanced backwards at the previous fifteen years that had, she said, made her the woman she was, given her the voice she had, she recalled the ‘sustained excitement’ of a life and an identity which, just for a while assumed that desired political change was inevitable; passivity or pessimism merely foolish; indeed, the mark of a hopefully soon-to-become-obsolete ‘femininity’: ‘I was never so content and productive as when I felt my ideas fed into collective practice and were sure of a critical response that had an immediate political inflection’.²² Amazing!

In the new congested field of confessional memoir writing, it is, unsurprisingly, precisely this grounding of self in shared political struggle that is hard to find. Thus, despite all that feminism has put on the public agenda, the disappearance of such confidence in collective political agency means that much confessional writing today serves less as a bench-mark of feminism’s continuities, as of its discontinuities and

relocations. In *Making Trouble*, I mentioned another telling rendition of changed times, when the German writer and feminist scholar, Frigga Haug, recalled the ‘catastrophe’ attending her attempt to teach a course on ‘memory work’ in Canada in the 1990s. Insisting on the need for attendant therapists and the imposition of other forms of psychological safeguards, she was shocked to discover that her students all thought it self-evident that her ‘memory work’ would involve attempts ‘to reveal an incestuous past, an idea that they found fascinating and horrible in equal measure’.²³ It was not what this old Marxist feminist had anticipated, nor what she had encountered a mere decade earlier. So, yes, it is possible to trace a lineage out of feminism, into today’s trauma talk, *but* it comes with an altogether new twist, gutted of much of the rhetoric that spawned it.

For sure, second-wave feminism opened the family vaults to reveal rape, child abuse, sexual misery and domestic battery. But, this was always associated with the broader battle to understand and confront common injuries and injustice, never just a personal struggle. One way of helping to overcome a harmful past, it was argued, was to embrace the shared political journey women had begun to empower women, and other vulnerable groups, everywhere. The lost or damaged childhoods disclosed in today’s trauma narratives are packaged primarily to provoke the excitement of moral outrage, devoid of calls to locate private worlds of grief and shame within broader political analysis. Most feminists have pointed to the dangerous gender dynamic triggering many forms of personal abuse which, at least when sexual, is most often perpetrated by men. The cultural scaffolding of ‘manhood’, with its false promises of status and authority, is part of the long history of social tolerance for men who have abused and sought to control and subordinate women and children. There are multiple gendered configurations, interacting with aspects of social deprivation and other complex cultural differences, which throw a little light upon which boys, and which men, are most prone to violence, while themselves also being at greatest risk of being harmed by other men from their own social milieu. These are the men furthest from achieving the everyday respect masculinity is supposed to confer on them.²⁴ Such specific contexts of social vulnerability and abuse, however, are rarely aired today, except for those who turn a racist gaze on ‘alien’ cultures,

nowadays no longer Jewish, but Islamic or Arabic. Nor, in the cultural predilection for stories of shame, abuse and cruelty, do we find any equivalent demand for accounts of the brutalising effects of poverty, insecurity, failure, disregard, disparagement on all those firmly identified as ‘losers’ (or worse) in new worlds remorselessly calibrating every public move we make.²⁵

GENERATIONS OF FEMINISM

In my own recent writing, some thirty years after the waning of Seventies’ feminism, it was *still* clutching some tattered thread of optimism that I embarked on *Making Trouble*. I’ve mentioned all the problems of trying to offer a portrait of a political moment, or anything else, knowing the limitations of retrospection, and the relatively privileged niches from which one usually speaks. Battles over inclusion rise and fall, over time, registering the competing outlooks, accusations and injuries, sustained in the ‘House of Difference’, as Audré Lord named her own multiple sites of class, racial and sexual exclusions in relation to feminism in the 1980s.²⁶ And even from the very place we encounter the world, it is clear that people relate to the same historical moments in such diverse ways that generalisation is precarious. In *The Work of Mourning*, Derrida characteristically muses, ‘It would be easy to show that the times of those who seem to belong to the same epoch ... remain infinitely heterogeneous and, to tell the truth, completely unrelated to one another.’ Yet even Derrida who, like Lacan, Foucault, Kristeva, and many of their peers, tended to disdain the collective in the name of cherishing singularities, continues in this passage to add: ‘On another level ... There are knots, points of great condensation, places of high valuation, paths of decision or interpretation that are virtually unavoidable’.²⁷

There are. And it was precisely these pooled paths of interpretation, shared spaces of elation, diverse practices of protest, which I pondered in the form of personal/collective memory writing I attempted in *Making Trouble*. Despite all the pitfalls, it is still worth returning, every now and then, to those moments in our lives when, whatever our previous or subsequent timidities, we shared with others such a strong sense that we might be able to make a difference to the ways of the world that they mark us forever. This

will usually be, of course, when collective hopes begin to meet with some success, at least in the sense of being applauded by others we want to connect with (the context for Kaplan's 'radiant hopes'). For sure, many witnesses are necessary to hold on to any such sense of a significant past, even of our own memories of it, if thoughts of those earlier periods are to hold out against the platitudes of the present. Apart from all their other benefits, this is the point of continuing friendships, surviving comrades, all those who knew our younger selves, including even our old opponents and rivals, those who remain 'witnesses in spite of themselves' (as Marc Bloch wrote) who help us fight the amnesias new times solicit, when old paths have diverged, or disappeared completely beneath the fresh tracks laid in contemporary skirmishes.²⁸²⁹ The refurbished account of Women's Liberation, for instance, is one in which 'second-wave' feminists, although seen as right to have demanded equality and respect for women, are everywhere misconstrued as having been tough, ambitious mavericks: seventies feminists stand accused of 'betraying' mothers, ignoring children and – of course, of course – hating men. Let me comment on these narrative mutations.

'Feminists were ambitious mavericks'? Not in any feminist domain I came across in Britain. Feminist activists often lived in squats or collective houses, never idle, but often doing their campaigning and radical work on the dole. (Indeed, I was often eyed with suspicion for being a homeowner and holding down a professional job.) Today's career woman resides in a galaxy far, far away, from the world which housed the alternative dreams of mutuality women's liberationists shared in the 1970s. This was a time when, in my milieu, troubling dilemmas around self-reliance and collective responsibilities meshed with the desire to create a fairer world, all in ways that were, rather obsessively, indeed, moralistically, 'anti-ambition'. 'I never had a notion of a career, in the typical sixties complacent way, I just thought you lived for politics and earned enough money to survive,' my friend Sheila Rowbotham confided to Michelene Wandor about her life in the days of Women's Liberation.³⁰

‘Feminists betrayed mothers’? Betrayed mothers? Lord, give me patience! The dilemmas surrounding feminism and motherhood have proved not only enduringly challenging, but the site of the most hurtful historical amnesia. It is unyielding dogma today that Women’s Liberation ‘ignored the needs of mothers’, dozens of books support the charge: the accusations of betrayal come as much from other women as from men. This tells me two crucial things about mothering: how easy it remains, still, to make women feel guilty about the issue; how compelling, even now, the forces trying to place all manner of problems back in the lap of that creature who is, definitively, female – mother. In my birthplace, one daily newspaper in Melbourne ³¹ has hosted a series of articles on ‘The sins of our feminist mothers’. Middle-aged women are held responsible for the fact that, supposedly, their daughters are now ‘childless and angry’. These articles all ignore the formidable economic and social obstacles now contributing to young women’s reproductive decisions, to ask instead, ‘Why did feminism forget motherhood?’ ³² Forget motherhood? In my story, we were the vanguard, the beating heart, of women’s liberation: the equal of the Marxist proletariat, especially if single mothers. But soon enough, motherhood itself was part of our celebrations. Have we so soon forgotten Adrienne Rich’s *Of Women Born*, acclaimed by feminists internationally in the 1970s for its account of the wisdom and potential joys of motherhood, once carefully distinguished from its coercive regulation by patriarchal institutions? Indeed, Ann Snitow suggests, writing of her own infertility, while women’s liberation once hoped to support women’s choices, whether to have children of their own or not to, it is in practice maternal experience that we have primarily marked and honoured. ³³ Not only were mothers often the stars of Women’s Liberation, in my memories, but we created an ethos in which men too were seen as privileged to be able to put time and energy into children (their own or those of friends and comrades). This was a rather glorious ideological shift, and one that has proved, if partially, enduring, even as the radiant hopes of those initiating it lie buried under fresher sands. In her wonderful memoir (written just before her tragically early death), Lorna Sage vividly evoked the terrifying drama of her accidental pregnancy at sixteen, prior to her knowingly engaging in penetrative sex. Although soon respectably married, she found the humiliations endured by women in public maternity wards in 1959 so devastating that a week after giving birth to her daughter, and still running a

temperature, she plotted to jump out the window leaving her baby behind, screaming at the punitive Day Sister that she would rather die than remain in the hospital a day longer.³⁴ It was my own experience: ‘Be quiet! You’re upsetting the other women’, each of us was curtly told, as we lay, all alone, in our hospital cubicles, enduring the suffering of labour pains.

Feminists hated men? Ah yes, we ‘hated’ those creatures so many of us spent so much of our lives working with, loving, cajoling, as we tried, with no small measure of success, to talk them out of their inherent sense of entitlements and into fully sharing the struggles and responsibilities of our personal lives.³⁵ There were passionate rows and many tensions, yet some men did adjust rather quickly, immersing themselves in domestic life and relating with genuine concern and warmth to children, including those who were not their own. Hatred, had nothing to do with it!

The image of feminists retrospectively thrust upon us seem barely to approach the new ways of being women that Seventies activists tried to fashion and enact. Yet, that is hardly surprising, when identities are best seen as active and ongoing projects, their staging, if not their structural constraints and symbolic weight, shifting with the times. It was the distinctly heightened tussles around the contradictions of being a woman in the liberatory foreground of Sixties radicalism, confronting the pornographically enhanced misogyny in the counter-cultural background of that decade, which had ineluctably instigated the emergence of feminist consciousness in the following decade. Researching *Making Trouble*, I was wading through biographies, memoirs, every old feminist pamphlet, magazine, and more, I could lay my hands on, talking for hours with my last remaining women’s group (tellingly, a small network of friends who are now feminist scholars), and collecting responses from a far broader network of women activists from the 1970s, assessing the personal journeys they had travelled. Although all of my respondents were fearful of generalising, their memories always resonated with each other, and my own thoughts, looking back to the close of the Sixties. ‘I didn’t know who I was then,’ Catherine Hall begins; ‘I was on the run,’ Barbara Taylor recalls; ‘It was lonely as an American Jew, trying to be an academic, a New Leftie and a mother,’

Cora Kaplan adds; 'I was very confused,' Sally Alexander explains; 'I think now there was no way to be a woman and to be intelligent and articulate in the Sixties.'³⁶ Yes, it was that added twist, 'being a mother', that catapulted most of us in my remaining women's group, myself included, into the opening years of Women's Liberation. Similar memories leap out of the anthologies covering those early years in the UK, as one woman after another repeats similar confusion, often triggered by the arrival of children, however much desired, leaving them unmoored from the adult lives they had been prepared for by the close of the Sixties: 'I went into a lengthy period of subdued shock ... I sat with my big, ... wide-eyed baby ... wondering who I was, who he was.' Sue O'Sullivan's words capture the nuance of so many other accounts from those years.³⁷

It was from just such shaky foundations that all of these women who were soon at the heart of Women's Liberation had emerged, as they began building their local women's groups and throwing themselves into radical activism. Today, new feminist voices writing on maternal subjectivity suggest that the sense of disorientation and loss of self after giving birth for the first time is hardly surprising, the outcome of a type of narcissistic shock as the mother mourns her former self-sufficiency and youthful independence, swallowed up (with metonymic accuracy) meeting the needs of her baby.³⁸ True enough. However, it was facing the turmoil and pretences of femininity itself, whether or not accompanied by the demands of motherhood, which was alarming so many young women back then. In one of the first British autobiographies to analyse the impact of the Women's Liberation on her life, Elizabeth Wilson depicts the blankness, passivity and confusion she felt entering adulthood, confronting the 'stifling, artificial prison of gender'.³⁹ One last snapshot: Just before she would begin to flourish as a feminist writer in the 1970s, Sara Maitland crawled into the decade out of an NHS mental hospital, her release date, December 1969. She had already attended her first women's group in Oxford that year: 'I emerged from the hospital into the Seventies with no doubts at all about where I now belonged. Things change, of course. But I have never looked back'.⁴⁰ Interestingly, when those early Seventies feminists later recalled the impact of feminism on their lives, there were certain similarities with the spiritual quests of Hodgkin's seventeenth-

century scribes. Women's lives were seen in terms of their relation to something larger than themselves. 'Women's liberation suddenly lifted the curtain concealing the big world from us, and oh it was exciting,' Sarah Benton recalls; 'You had this feeling of being high, and somehow corporate, part of something, large, public and significant ... It was such a turbulent change', are characteristic words from those providing their memories of the birth of women's liberation.⁴¹ A new 'feminist literacy' spread quickly into the mainstream, reflected in those 'consciousness-raising' novels of the 1970s, sometimes first self-published by new feminist writing groups, then by the emerging feminist presses, for a while sustaining all this emancipatory zeal.

So that was then, almost 40 years ago. But for women who found their voices and connected with others, at least partially, and however diversely, through politics, what mark, if any, can we make on what was, at least till yesterday, this new US-led, turbo-charged, capitalist order: its recent proclivity for military interventionism, market mayhem, global recklessness, entrenching poverty, economic displacement, while making vassals of many poorer sovereign states? 'I feel like a survivor of a lost world, a pre-Jurassic relic,' the feminist poet, Denise Riley wrote to me; 'at the same time I have the impression that, for some younger women, there is a strong eagerness to know how we experienced things.' Because my generation entered prosperous times in the developed world, high expectations came easily to many of us: 'I miss the optimism we had that now things are starting, they will go forward, these changes are irreversible,' Cynthia Cockburn responded to my questions.⁴² It is the loss of this shared confidence, when the boundary between understanding the world and changing it dissolves, that so many old radicals mourn.⁴³ In fact, Cockburn, in her sixties, remains quite as militant as ever, organising with the global networks of Women in Black working for justice, peace and multi-ethnic democracies, combating the masculinist posturing maintaining militarism on all sides. But the mood is different now, she writes, 'sorry, gloom gloom gloom'. Yet, while the gloom is inevitable, the feminist political identities I look at in *Making Trouble* often proved remarkably resilient. And this is despite, and because of, our awareness of the ways in which apparent respect for women's rights has been meretriciously deployed to sideline

other significant struggles against class and ethnic injustice, even, maddeningly, forming part of current Western imperialist rhetoric defending its aggressive interventionist stances against Islamic ‘backwardness.’⁴⁴ And radical identities also survive both despite, and because of, all we now know about their contingency, fluidity and artifice, as the former diva of anti-identity politics, Judith Butler, personifies today. It is scrutinising another very particular, and for her significant, though obviously totally troubled, identity, *as a Jew*, that Butler feels she can most forcefully criticise Israel’s contempt for Palestinian human rights and its continuing colonial expansionism. Many others, myself included, feel much the same but (that is another story, which sadly I have no time for here).

So to conclude, the trick for keeping pessimism at bay, at least partially, as we age, is surely *never* simply to turn our backs on our past, but rather to think critically, think historically, and to see, as we saw once before, how fast things sometimes change, when they start to change. For all my hesitations about the memoir packaging, they can be important for keeping the political imagination alive. Ironically, as Nancy Miller optimistically suggests, memoir ‘can serve to help us escape from the strictly personal, to contemplate the bigger picture’.⁴⁵ It is Adrienne Rich, however, who most eloquently stresses the necessity to revisit the past, critically, to start over, time and again. This is the paradoxical nature of any radical tradition worth preserving, as it tries not only to confront the victories and defeats of history, but also to perform the ‘midnight salvage’ that helps keep ‘both passion and politics alive’.⁴⁶ Let’s hope so, anyway!

¹ Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History,’ (Spring, 1940), H. Zohn (trans.), in *Illuminations*, London, Fontana, 1973.

² Soviet joke quoted in Lawrence W. Levine, *The Unpredictable Past: Explorations in American Cultural History*, New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1993, p.vi.

³ Eric Hobsbawm, *Drawbridge*, February, 2008. His arguments are developed more fully in his book, *On History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p413.

⁵ Eric Hobsbawm, *Interesting Times*, London, p57.

⁶ Bill Schwarz, ‘Already the Past: Memory and Historical Time’, in Susannah Radstone, Katharine Hodgkin (eds), *Regimes of Memory*, London, Routledge, 2003.

⁷ See Hayden White's original critique, "The Burden of History", *History and Theory*, 5, 2 (1966), pp111-134; Joan Scott, 'Preface' to *Gender and the Politics of History*, 2nd edition, New York, Columbia Press, 1999.

⁸ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'History and the Politics of Recognition', in Keith Jenkins et al (eds), *Manifestos of History*, London, Routledge, 2008, p78.

⁹ Bruce Robbins, *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*, Princeton, Princeton UP, 2007.

¹⁰ Carolyn Steedman, 'Enforced Narratives. Stories of Another Self', in Penny Summerfield, Celia Lury, Tess Coslett (eds), *Feminism & Autobiography - Texts, Theories, Methods*, pp25-39.

¹¹ Kate Hodgkin, 'Other people's stories: subjectivity, autobiography, identification', unpublished paper; see also Kate Hodgkin, *Madness in Seventeenth-Century Autobiography*, London, Palgrave, 2006.

¹² Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*, Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1995, p95.

¹³ Adam Phillips, 'On Translating a Person' in *Promises, Promises*, London, Faber, 2000, pp126-7.

¹⁴ Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes: A Memoir*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1999; Anne Enright, London, *The Gathering*, Jonathan Cape, 2007.

¹⁵ Edmund White, 'On the line', New introduction to *A Boy's Own Story*, London, Picador, 2000, pii.

¹⁶ See, e.g., Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *Individualization*, London, Sage, 2001.

¹⁷ Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals*, London, Hutchinson, 1976; Dick Hebdidge, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, London, Methuen, 1979.

¹⁸ Sheila Rowbotham, *Woman's Consciousness, Man's World*, Harmondsworth, Pelican 1973.

¹⁹ Alix Kates Shulman, *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*, New York, Knopf, 1972; Lisa Alther, *Kinflicks*, London, Virago Press, 1999; Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, London, Andre Deutsch, 1978.

²⁰ For an excellent overview see Roger Luckhurst, 'Traumaculture', in *Remembering the 1990s: New Formations*, 50 (Autumn 2003).

For examples of some of the bestsellers in this 'survival of trauma' genre, see Dave Pelzer, *A Child Called It: One Child's Courage to Survive*, Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, Inc, 1995; Dave Pelzer, *A Man Named Dave: A Story of Triumph and Forgiveness*, New York, Dutton Books, 1999; Anthony Godby Johnson, *A Rock and a Hard Place: One Boy's Triumphant Story*, New York, Signet; Torey Haden, *The Tiger's Child*, New York, Avon Books, 1995; Ruth Picardie, *Before I say Goodbye*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998; Oscar Moore, *PWA: Looking AIDS in the Face*, London, Picador, 1996. In the art world Tracey Emin, Nan Goldin, Gillian Wearing and Tracy Moffat are among the best known imagists of wounded bodies; see Julian Stallabrass, *High Art Lite: British Art in the 1990s*, London, Verso, 1999; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: the avant-garde at the end of the century*, Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1996.

²¹ Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Cultures of Feminism*, London, Verso, 1986, p1.

²² *Ibid.*, pp8-9.

²³ Frigga Haug, 'Sexual deregulation or, the child abuser as hero in neoliberalism', *Feminist Theory*, 2, 1, 2001, p56. From a different political moment, Haug had coined the term 'memory work' for a type of Foucauldian methodology used to unpack the complex meanings and charged

discursive contexts shadowing the words we use for naming bodily attributes, enabling people to reflect upon their corporeal pasts, while trying to 'wriggle free of the constraints of purely personal and individual experience', Frigga Haug in Haug, et al., *Female Sexualization: A Collective Work of Memory*, Erica Carter (trans.), NY, Verso, 1987, p36.

²⁴ See, for instance, Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present*, London, Virago, 2007; B. Pressman, 'Violence against women: Ramifications of gender, class and race inequality', in M. P. Mirkin, (ed.), *Women in Context: Toward a Feminist Reconstruction of Psychotherapy*, New York, Guilford Press, 1998; R. Carillo and J. Tello (eds.) *Family Violence and Men of Color: Healing the Wounded Male Spirit*, New York, Springer Publishing Company, 1998.

²⁵ Marina Morrow, Olena Hankivsky and Colleen Varcoe, 'Women and Violence: The Effects of Dismantling the Welfare State', *Critical Social Policy*, 24, 3 (2004), 358-384.

²⁶ Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, London, Sheba, 1983, p225

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, 'The Deaths of Roland Barthes', *The Work of Mourning*, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (trans.), Chicago and London, Chicago University Press, 2001.

²⁸ As Sue O'Sullivan notes, 'Many of the "words" of the women's liberation movement have been tamed: gender obscures women, rights obscure liberation and freedom, advocacy obscures radical activism, and the divisions and inequalities of class, age, race, ethnicity and sexuality reverberate as they reconfigure', in Sue O'Sullivan, 'Sweet and Sour', *Red Pepper*, issue 161, Aug/Sept, 2008, p.22.

²⁹ The quotation is an oft-used phrase originally used by Marc Bloch, writing on the importance of unwritten evidence in historical observation, from his famous text, Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954, p.61).

³⁰ Sheila Rowbotham, interviewed by Michelene Wandor in Michelene Wandor, *Once a Feminist: Stories of a Generation*, London, Virago, p41.

³¹ *The Age*.

³² Virginia Haussegger, 'The sins of our feminist mothers', *The Age*, 23 July 2002; Zelda Grimshaw, 'Mothering: Feminism's unfinished business', *The Age*, 1 August 2002; Virginia Haussegger, 'Has feminism let us down?', *The Age*, 23 April 2003.

³³ Ann Snitow, 'Feminism and Motherhood: An American Reading', *Feminist Review*, 40 (Spring 1992), 32-51.

³⁴ Lorna Sage, *Bad Blood: A Memoir*, London, Fourth Estate, 2000, pp261-263.

³⁵ Maureen Freely, *What about us? An Open Letter to the Mothers Feminism Forgot*, London, Bloomsbury, 1996.

³⁶ Notes taken from recording in conversation with my reading group, 1 February 2003; Sally Alexander, in Michelene Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, op. cit., p85.

³⁷ Sue O'Sullivan, interviewed in Michelene Wandor, *ibid.*, p218. See also the interviews with Audrey Battersby, Janet Rée, Val Charlton, p113; p97; p161, respectively.

³⁸ See Lisa Baraitser, 'Oi Mother, Keep Ye' Hair On! Impossible transformations of maternal subjectivity', *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, 7, 3, pp217-238, 2006; Naomi Wolf, *Misconceptions: Truth, lies and the unexpected on the journey to motherhood*, London, Chatto & Windus, 2001; Susan Kraemer, 'Betwixt the dark and the daylight of maternal subjectivity: Meditations on the threshold', *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 6 (1996), pp765-791.

³⁹ Elizabeth Wilson, *Mirror Writing: An Autobiography*, London, Virago, 1982, p87 and p90

⁴⁰ Sara Maitland, 'I Believe in Yesterday: An Introduction', in Sara Maitland (ed.), *Very Heaven: Looking Back at the 1960s*, London, Virago, 1988, p9-10.

⁴¹ Sarah Benton, in response to my questions; Janet Rée, in Wandor, *Once a Feminist*, op. cit., p99.

⁴² Reply to my questions.

⁴³ Sent in reply to my questions.

⁴⁴ See Judith Butler, 'Violence, Mourning, Politics', in *Precarious Lives: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London, Verso, 2004; Lynne Segal, 'Gender, War and Militarism: Making and Questioning the Links', *Feminist Review*, 88 (2008), pp21–35.

⁴⁵ Nancy Miller, 'But Enough About Me: What Do You Think About My Memoir', in *But Enough About Me*, New York, Columbia, p25.

⁴⁶ Adrienne Rich, *The Art of the Possible*, New York, Norton, 2001, p75.