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For Peer Review

Feminism's Family Drama: Genealogies, Historiography, and Kate Walbert's A Short History of Women

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Abstract:	This article considers Kate Walbert's A Short History of Women (2009), whose fragmented narrative is preoccupied with the continuities and fissures in the history of feminism and with the changes in women's lived experiences that have shaped its developments from the nineteenth to the present. By exploring feminist history through female genealogy, Walbert's historiographic metafiction illustrates the perils and potentials of the generational methods that have predominated feminist historiography in recent decades. By thus engaging in feminism's family drama, the novel provides a self-conscious illustration of feminist genealogies as simultaneously fruitful and fraught, limiting and liberating, and yet inescapable and useful.

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Feminism's Family Drama: Genealogies, Historiography, and Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women*

Nadine Muller (Liverpool John Moores University)

For Peer Review

Abstract

This article considers Kate Walbert's *A Short History of Women* (2009), a novel that follows the history of feminism from the nineteenth century to the present by telling the stories of a hunger striking suffragette and four generations of her female descendants. By exploring feminist history through female genealogy, Walbert's historiographic metafiction illustrates the perils and potentials of the generational methods that have predominated feminist historiography in recent decades. By thus engaging in feminism's family drama, the novel provides a self-conscious illustration of feminist genealogies as simultaneously fruitful and fraught, limiting and liberating, and yet inescapable and useful.

Keywords

Feminism; feminist history; historiographic metafiction; feminist generations

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Astrid Henry speculates that 'the 1990s may well be remembered as a decade defined by the notion of feminist generations' (2004: 3), a concept which had become so prevalent by the turn of the millennium that Rebecca Dakin Quinn coined the term 'matrophor' to denote 'the persistent nature of maternal metaphors in feminism' (1997: 179). Entwined with the image of feminist 'waves', the matrophor was first adopted by the women's movements in Britain and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. The first wave employed images of eruption and ignition such as 'volcanoes, lava, and fire' (LeGates, 2001: 188) to characterise its work,[i] and initially neither American nor British second-wave feminists looked to their nineteenth and early-twentieth-century predecessors. Yet, they soon 'began to identify the previous century's movement as their history and their political foundation' (Henry, 2004: 57–8). On both sides of the Atlantic feminists established a generational and familial framework that, through the wave metaphor and the matrophor, categorised feminist activities at the turn of the twentieth century and of the 1960s and 70s as 'two moments in the same movement' (Henry, 2004: 53). The generational concept has since dominated discourses of feminism's history, and has become a common means of describing historical shifts in feminist theory, politics, and activism. Clare Hemmings suggests that in the first decade of the twenty-first century a particular increase in the use of and focus on feminist generations occurred, a development which, she speculates, 'may also be an effect of the postmillennium moment' (2011: 236).

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Born in New York City in 1961 and a creative writing lecturer at Yale University until 2005, Kate Walbert's publishing career began at this point in feminist history with a collection of short stories titled *Where She Went* (1998). In *A Short History of Women* (2009) she fictionally explores this genealogical conception of feminist history through the fragmented narratives of five generations of women. In a series of disjointed short stories connected principally through the shared lineage of their female protagonists, we meet – not in chronological order – Dorothy Trevor (later Trevor Townsend), a Cambridge graduate and suffragette, and her daughter Evelyn, who lives through the two world wars and becomes a chemistry professor in the U.S. Evelyn's niece, Dorothy Townsend Barrett, takes part in consciousness raising groups in the 1970s, divorces her husband, develops an interest in Florence Nightingale, protests against the Iraq War and starts blogging at the age of 78. Her daughters are Caroline and Elizabeth: the former a divorcee who struggles to comprehend her mother's political actions; the latter a married potter and busy mother of three, living in an anxiety-ridden post 9/11 New York City. The youngest generation in this family tree is Caroline's daughter Dorothy, a Yale student who chooses to be known as Dora, taking her inspiration from Picasso's mistress and muse Dora Maar.[ii] Walbert's novel is inherently concerned with the ways in which these women's stories are connected to each other, and with the ways in which they are all, to varying extents and in wildly different ways, shaped by the narrative of their suffragette foremother.

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This essay considers *A Short History of Women* as a work of historiographic metafiction that explores both the potentials and perils of genealogical approaches to feminist historiography. Thus expanding and connecting theoretical and literary scholarship on the feminist mother-daughter trope, it first reviews the concept of feminist generations – the matrophor – as a historiographic method, investigating its history in feminist discourse, and its empowering as well as limiting potential for feminist narratives. In the second part of my analysis, I turn to the context of contemporary women's writing in particular, situating Walbert's novel and its genealogies within a tradition of feminist historiographic metafiction that interrogates feminism's own methods and practices in writing the history of the movement, and of women. The article's final part steers away from the novel's historiographic techniques and towards the politics of the female and feminist (hi)stories it (re)writes. The novel's matrilineal narratives, I suggest, revisit the cyclical nature of feminist issues in the Western world, including the recurring discourses of hysteria that became attached to feminist activism in the nineteenth century and the persistent perils of women's negotiation between their domestic and professional identities, while also tracing the history of women's education.

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Genealogical Strategies in Feminist Historiography

For second-wave feminists, designating the women's movements of the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as their foremothers enabled them to locate their cause 'within

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the longer trajectory of feminism's history' (Henry, 2004: 58) and to 'validate feminism at a time when it was often ridiculed as silly and not politically serious' (Henry, 2004: 53). However, unlike the close generational connection between second and third-wave feminism upon which the mother-daughter dyad can be mapped with relative ease and to which it often applies literally, the relationship second wavers established between themselves and the first wave 'cannot so easily be represented as familial' (Henry, 2004: 3). Consequently, in order to designate their political heritage in the women's movement of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, feminists of the 1960s and 70s first had to denounce the 'wasted generation' (Firestone, 1970: 15) of their biological mothers by committing psychological matricide (Chesler, 1997: 55). Claiming that feminism died after 1914 instead of 'recognizing the ways in which [it] continued to exist [... and] may have been transformed' (Henry, 2004: 71) after many suffragettes had given up their struggle at the onset of the First World War, second wavers were able to claim that feminism was 'reborn' with their movement (Henry, 2004: 66). Paradoxically, to establish their place in feminist history and reinforce the validity of their concerns, they felt the need to relinquish their biological mothers' and their grandmothers' generations in order to claim their matrilineage in the more distant past and, therefore, their identities as feminists in the present. In this instance, then, the matrophor's problematic emphasis on age difference (between mother and daughter) proves self-defeating to the project of feminist history as it facilitates the exclusion of

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these biological mothers, that is, of four decades of women.

Continuing the utilisation of the matrophor, third-wave feminists have profited from its use in similar ways to their forerunners. By representing their feminism as part of an ongoing history of political struggle, 'this generation enters into feminism through both rejecting the imagined post-feminism of their immediate predecessors (and some of their peers) and reclaiming the feminism of the early second wave' (Henry, 2004: 26). One obvious but crucial difference to the second wave's relationship with its feminist foremothers is that women of the third wave are contemporaries – and often both the biological as well as figurative daughters – of the second-wave generation (who themselves were much less likely to have to face their chosen foremothers directly). This generational proximity has facilitated dialogue between feminists of both waves, and since the turn of the millennium cross-generational conversation has become a popular form in feminist scholarship in particular.[iii] While such pieces usually illustrate second and third-wave feminists' perceived similarities and differences within a context of mutual respect as well as scrutiny, they also frequently highlight the assumptions and constructions on which each wave's perception of the other is founded, that is, the ways in which women construct images of their feminist mothers and daughters in accordance with or in contrast to their perceptions of themselves.

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During its earlier years in particular, the emergence of a new, third wave also prompted some writers to declare their outright rejection of their second-wave mothers, and, indeed, a perceived superiority over them. Some feminist writers of the 1990s, including Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, and shortly after also Rene Denfeld and Natasha Walter, strove to represent the second wave as outdated and their politics as inappropriate for the cultural landscape of the late-twentieth-century Western world.[iv] As Imelda Whelehan puts it, for these women 'the more potent legacies of feminism lie forgotten and the Second Wave comes instead to be remembered as that of whining victimhood and passivity' (2005: 166). Once again, then, the feminist mother is identified as old and unsuitable, serving as a means to emphasise the daughter's embodiment of innovation and improvement, even leading Walter to baptise her particular brand of the movement as 'the *new* feminism' (1998: 4),[v] and Roiphe to feel as though feminism was 'a stern mother telling her how to behave' (Henry, 2004: 5).

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While the third wave, due to its proximity to a previous feminist generation, has no need to commit the psychological matricide the second wave considered necessary, third wavers nevertheless have felt the need to reject the decade which by now has become almost universally identified as a period of backlash, a time when feminism, once again, was dead: the 1980s.[vi] Emulating the exclusion from feminist historical records which the second wave had forced upon the period between the 1920s and 1960s, the third

wave's use of a generational framework and its construction of the 80s as an era of backlash means that women who were in their twenties and thirties during this decade 'can be understood as neither "mothers" nor "daughters" within feminism's imagined family structure' (Henry, 2004: 27). Therefore, they must 'be metaphorically exiled from feminism's family' (Henry, 2004: 4) in order for the third wave to establish itself as the (sometimes proud and at other times embarrassed) progeny of the second. These selective acts of rejection and identification with their respective biological and figurative foremothers, then, can be read as a manifestation of what Adrienne Rich has termed 'matrophobia': an attempt at rejection which is predicated upon the fear of an already established (although not necessarily consciously acknowledged) identification. Matrophobia is the 'fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's mother*', caused by 'a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's guard one will identify with her completely' (Rich, 1976: 236). Like Diana Fuss's notion of 'disidentification' (1995: 7), Rich's concept describes 'an identification that one fears to make only because one has already made it' (Fuss, 1995: 7).

The matrophor – as a means of conceptualising and chronicling the (ongoing) history of feminism and its developments – has attracted both support and criticism, of course. Besides its controversial replication of positivist understandings of history in which each generation improves upon the former, the matrophor imposes further restrictions

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on feminism, forever implying that feminists can never be anything but mothers and daughters and that their relationship to each other is confined to the paradigm of the familial family, that traditional conception of which feminism has so often challenged. Thus limiting the possible connections between women, the matrilineal metaphor does not allow for 'various ideological and political differences among and between feminists and feminisms, reducing such differences to the singular difference of age and generation' (Henry, 2004: 182). A genealogical understanding of feminist history and the classifications by age it purports arguably become self-defeating to the feminist project as they exclude entire generations of women from feminism's imagined family tree. In addition to exclusion, exclusion the matrophor also encourages competition rather than collaboration. Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford suggest that the notion of feminist generations means women are 'set up in competition with one another' (2004: 176), an issue which ultimately 'paralyses feminism' (2004: 165) and renders familial metaphors 'merely another tool of the backlash' (2004: 178). Simultaneously, feminists' focus on their own generational differences can lead to the dangerous assumption that 'feminism itself [...] has become the enemy' (Henry, 2004: 39), and that within the figurative feminist family, mothers and daughters then tend to forget its 'absent father' (Henry, 2004: 183). These issues then perpetually repeat themselves in the form of a family drama, as Hemmings points out: 'Generational logic […] represents the past and present through generational struggles within a *family drama*, as inevitable and bound

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to be reproduced with each successive "generation"' (original italics, 2011: 148).

Yet, by enabling women to establish a feminist genealogy and, thus, history, the matrilineal metaphor can also facilitate empowering cross-historical identification for feminist 'daughters' by 'granting them authority and a generational location from which to speak' (Henry, 2004: 3). Like other familial concepts, the matrophor can potentially contribute to the articulation of conflicts between feminist groups and generations, 'not exacerbat[ing] tensions so much as [… helping] to get a handle on them' (Fraiman, 1999: 527). Gillis and Munford rightly criticise the problematic encouragement of competition, but arguably matrilineal conceptions of feminism can also enable communication, negotiation, and collaboration. Equally, while the marine imagery of tides and waves carries problematic connotations of periodical retreat, the mother-daughter concept frames feminism as hereditary and potentially lasting, as something that can be nurtured, passed on, and adapted by each generation.

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Fictionalising Feminist Historiography

It is in contemporary women's fiction that we find the most imaginative and fruitful exploration of the perils and potentials of matrilineal narratives as a feminist historiographic tool. Since the 1990s in particular 'feminist discourses within and outside the academy have taken a self-reflexive turn' (Siegel, 1997: 59), a development which also applies to the highly self-conscious fiction that arose in the 1960s and 1970s,

and which arguably has come into its own both in terms of popularity and literary sophistication since the end of the twentieth century, not least in the works of A. S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, among others. At the same time as feminists have been exploring methods of feminist storytelling in their scholarship, women writers have adopted the genre of historical fiction to trace women's histories and the ways they may have shaped female lives in the present day. Historical fiction – that is, fiction that is set partly or wholly in the more distant past – has long been recognised for its potential to make inventive and impactful contributions to the feminist historiographic project.[vii] Historiographic metafiction, 'those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages' (Hutcheon, 1988: 5), have the ability both to redress narrative perspectives that previously privileged male-centred and male-authored versions of history and to reflect on the process of history writing itself (Hutcheon, 1988: 5). This kind of fiction can function as 'part of the wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who have been excluded and marginalised' (King, 2005: 3–4).

Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, consciously and explicitly 'attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical [...] both thematically and formally' (1988: 108) by challenging history's claim to truth 'in

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historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems' (1988: 93). At a time when feminism turns a critical eye on its own narrative practices, the genre lends itself to feminist historiographic enquiry and to the creation of a feminist metanarrative, a potential which authors of neo-Victorian fiction in particular have mined. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) is perhaps one of the best-known examples here, with a female-centred plot that rewrites the nineteenth-century past while at the same time interrogating our ways of constructing historical and scholarly histories of women authors and their lives. Sarah Blake's *Grange House* (2006), too, is concerned with the ways in which the act of writing allows us to access, manipulate, and question our relationship to the past, and in particular to women's matrilineal narratives. Equally, Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* (2002) is entirely preoccupied with the status and effect of female genealogies on the plot's female protagonists, whose actions are entirely driven by their mothers' identities.[viii]

While Walbert's *A Short History of Women* shares some of the same concerns as these and other examples of women's historiographic metafiction, it is different in that it also seeks to self-consciously explore the history of feminism itself. This novel acts as a space in which 'the multiple histories of feminisms must be written, critiqued, and rewritten […] to effectively disrupt false boundaries and to destabilize traditional,

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monolithic history to expose diverse and often opposing experiences and positions' (Steenbergen, 2006: 177–8). It does so through its fictionalised narrative of the female descendants of suffragette Dorothy Trevor Townsend in the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Walbert's text is an exercise in feminist historiography at the same time as it also functions as a critical commentary on it, looking to those who – because of the limitations of generational thinking within feminism – have been excluded and marginalised through the genealogical historiographic methods.

The First World War, as historians have frequently noted, marked the beginning of the end for the struggle for women's suffrage and the first-wave feminist movement. The common perception is that 'the majority of feminists in all countries placed war activities before suffrage work' (LeGates, 2001: 283), and the subsequent inter-war years have been characterised widely by 'the absence of highly visible and effective organized feminist movements' (LeGates, 2001: 281). Recently historians have revisited and redressed such claims, and *A Short History of Women* also questions from the outset the definitions of feminism's various ends and beginnings, deaths and (re)births. For Walbert, 'history […] is textual: constantly shifting, continually in production, and always open to question' (Steenbergen, 2006: 177). The novel neither opens in the heyday of feminist activism nor with an account by a suffragette. Rather, we are introduced to Dorothy Trevor Townsend in 1914, in the early days of the First

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World War, through the perspective of her young daughter Evelyn, whom we first meet when she recollects her mother's deathbed, remarking: 'Mum starved herself for suffrage' (Walbert, 2009: 3). The story begins with what appears to be an end – the imminent death of a feminist mother and, by extension, of the first generation of the feminist movement – while at the same time introducing us to a figure who marks a beginning – Dorothy's daughter. Walbert's narrative thus highlights, questions, and rewrites the artificial temporal demarcations of feminist history.

For Peer Review

Indeed, from hereon in the novel's structure further defies its genealogical premise. Rather than tracing the branches of Dorothy's family tree chronologically, Walbert presents us with a fragmented narrative that skips forward and backward between different generations of women. Each chapter forms part of a fragmented yet connected whole, meaning we are prompted to compare not only the lives of adjacent generations but also to draw parallels and recognise differences across decades and centuries. Paradoxically, at the same time as the novel capitalises on a female genealogy by using it to explore feminist histories; its temporally disordered structure also dissects and reconfigures the familial trope that has become so central to feminist historiography. *A Short History of Women* thus employs a key strategy of historiographic metafiction by 'work[ing] *within* conventions in order to subvert them' (Hutcheon, 1988: 5).

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Dorothy Townsend Barrett – named after her suffragette grandmother – is the only child of Evelyn's brother, and her narrative, too, problematises genealogical accounts of feminism. Born in 1930 and part of the generation which fell victim to the second-wave's matricide, Dorothy takes part in rap sessions in the 1970s, but feels that as a woman in her early forties 'she cannot keep up with the modern, liberated' generation (Walbert, 2009: 120). She senses that there is an absence in her own history, a perception that reflects the silence surrounding her generation in many accounts of the feminist movement's story: 'I feel like a hollow bone [...] as if I echo, or rather, feel in myself an absence [...] as if I've forgotten something, as if there's a question I've forgotten to answer' (Walbert, 2009: 151). Dorothy's narrative represents a perspective that is 'frequently absent from recent discourse on feminism's (seemingly two) generations' (Henry, 2004: 4). To redress these silences in feminist historiography further, Walbert includes the narrative of Evelyn, chronicling her life during the 1930s and 40s, a period omitted from feminism's wave structure and often perceived as an ebb of feminist activity in Britain and America. For Evelyn, her mother's death was, like for many of her contemporaries, not an act of heroism or strength, but rather quite the opposite, a sign of weakness and a way of giving up. Evelyn is surrounded by voices which disapprove of her mother's actions, a sign of the period in which feminism, 'to the generation of young women who came of age in the 1920s' (Henry, 2004: 19), seemed no longer relevant.

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At the same time, however, the suffragette's daughter is also told by remaining family members that she resembles her mother, that she is 'a fighter [...] just like her, and stubborn as a goat, and wilful and determined and entirely lacking [...] in female wiles' (Walbert, 2009: 14), that she has 'inherited Mum's will, not to mention her temper', something which she recalls her aunt saying 'could either float me in good stead or kill me' (Walbert, 2009: 12). When the mathematically-gifted Evelyn leaves for New York to take up a refugee scholarship at Barnard College, she intends to become a 'blank slate' (Walbert, 2009: 97). She rejects her association with her mother and with her mother's cause, reassuring enquirers and herself: '"No relation," [...] I have sworn I'll start from nothing; that I am now no one's daughter' (Walbert, 2009: 92). For Evelyn, the denunciation of the women's movement is a denunciation of what she perceives as the cause of her mother's death. This disidentification with Dorothy becomes most pertinent when, having paid for her journey to the US, she finds herself unable to purchase food aboard the ship and, due to malnourishment, eventually faints upon her arrival at Barnard College. Ironically, then, Evelyn replicates her mother's actions by starving herself (if less intentionally) in order to take the opportunity to receive a university education; that is, to pursue the path that the women of her mother's generation paved for her. And while Evelyn's matricide and matrophobia are evident, her life choices and politics are anything but a rejection of the desire for equality that

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propelled her mother. Though not part of an organised women's movement, Evelyn's life and career illustrate a commitment to gender equality and to feminism, both through her academic achievements in the male-dominated field of science and in her function as a mentor to female students. Evelyn's story, then, prompts us to 'take into account the variety of ways in which feminism can flourish' (LeGates, 2001: 282), even at a time when the very term seemed to almost disappear entirely (LeGates, 2001: 281).

But not all of the suffragette's female ancestors try to eradicate their connection to their personal past. Dorothy, Evelyn's niece, researches her suffragette grandmother and has the desire 'to flaunt the new lineage, to be the lineage [… and] stand for something other than mother' (Walbert, 2009: 49). She seeks a new sense of self beyond motherhood and marriage, and does so by looking back to the past, to Florence Nightingale, but also to her own family history. What to Evelyn was the traumatic experience of her mother's self-inflicted death is, to Dorothy, a selfless sacrifice: her suffragette predecessor 'had given her life so that women might, quite simply, do something' (Walbert, 2009: 129–30). For Dorothy, her grandmother's suicide functions as a powerful message rather than a self-defeating, silent act: 'it changed things then [...] to do something', she remarks; 'she made up her mind; she took a stand [...] The point is she did something' (Walbert 2009: 38). Here, the keys to a female – and indeed to a feminist – identity in the present are lineage and history: 'One must always look for

For Peer Review

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antecedents [...] You have to start somewhere' (Walbert, 2009: 130). Here, the literal and figurative foremother – in this instance in the form of a grandmother – signals 'a way to a powerful female past' (Cosslett, 1996: 8) that inspires, legitimises, and enables female and feminist identities of the present.

When we discover that in her late seventies Dorothy begins to write and publish a blog 'on Florence Nightingale, Old Age, and Life' (Walbert, 2009: 108), we do so not through Dorothy's but through her daughter Caroline's narrative voice. One of Yale's first women graduates, a rape helpline volunteer, and successful business woman, Caroline's feminism is arguably a more pragmatic one than that of her mother, and the two find themselves at odds politically. When Dorothy stages one-woman protests against the Iraq War and is consequently imprisoned several times only to be bailed out by Caroline, her daughter urges her to 'get a life' (Walbert, 2009: 38), while the mother, in turn, is frustrated with what she perceives as the political apathy of her daughter's generation. As Hemmings suggests, this effect of feminist genealogies is a common one and leads to feminist loss narratives (2011: 147) in which, to the 'mother', 'the past […] was brighter and more political; [and] the present and future are doomed' (2011: 147). There is, then, a nostalgic longing in Dorothy's acts of looking backward. Although the novel as a whole resists tendencies to either reject or romanticise the past, in the case of Dorothy a matrilineal conception of feminist history seemingly discourages a positive

For Peer Review

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engagement with the movement's present.

Ironically, Caroline becomes aware of Dorothy's blog when, not for the first time, she searches the internet for 'the original Dorothy' (Walbert, 2009: 207). Hoping to find more than the 'various footnotes of current scholarship' she has memorised already, she instead encounters her mother's online identity. To Caroline and her sister Liz, the idea that Dorothy participates in an interactive online culture does not resonate with her maternal role. DT (Dorothy's screen name), is 'a woman once her mother, a blogger' (Walbert, 2009: 210), identities which are, in the daughters' views, incompatible. It is, however, because of this virtual existence that Caroline finds it possible to engage with her by responding to her posts – first anonymously, then self-identified through the content of her replies – and thus enter into a dialogue with Dorothy about their lives, their marriages, and those of Dorothy's concerns which cannot so easily be ascribed to the maternal. Paradoxically, it is through Caroline's virtual act of psychological matricide (or at least intentional oversight) in her quest for her great-grandmother that she is confronted and can engage with Dorothy as a fellow mother, woman, and feminist. It is only by temporarily laying off their familial identities and by assuming virtual selves not defined by their familial tie that mother and daughter can communicate outside of the generational paradigm and that each is encouraged to seek a connection with the woman who shares her present as well as (and, importantly, not

For Peer Review

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instead of) looking for a foremother in the distant past. Thus, if 'women's cross-generational relationships with one another can only be hostile' (Hemmings, 2011: 148) within the genealogical confines of the matrophor, they must be relinquished in order for collaboration and productive dialogue to become a possibility.

Both Dorothy and Caroline originate from and seek the same foremother, and their search for her – despite their different views on the suffragette's actions – is what unites them. The genealogical trope, in Walbert's hands, becomes powerful when deployed to unearth a feminist tradition; but when applied to feminists who co-exist in the same present, and who share, at least partially, the same future, the matrophor becomes a hindrance. Here, it leads to fragmentation and paralysis rather than collaborative action, and limits the possible relationships between women to only one combination: competition and conflict. Nevertheless, the novel's fragmented matrilineal narratives and their persistent preoccupation with the recurring gendered issues that impact on each generation's lived experiences also allow us – if not the protagonists themselves – to also delve further into the positive potentials a genealogical approach to feminist historiography can hold.

For Peer Review

Feminist Hystories: The Personal, the Political, and the Persistent

If *A Short History of Women* is preoccupied with the relationships between feminist

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generations and with the perils that accompany a genealogical approach to the histories of feminism, it is also equally interested in the commonalities across generations that such an approach may be able to highlight. In her discussion of the harmful effects of generational conceptualisations of feminism, Hemmings suggests that 'even where differences of generation within feminism are positively viewed, it is the differences between cohorts of feminists, rather than similarities across time and space, that are emphasised and that are understood to mark generation as such' (2011: 150). Walbert's text illustrates exactly this point, I would argue, but pays as much attention to the similarities as to the differences between the generations of women whose lives it sketches out. While certain economic, political, and cultural contexts – including access to education and the professions – shift across the periods covered by the novel's narratives, they do not simply stop being problematic in subsequent decades or even centuries. Instead, we are presented with recurring and indeed defining issues that affect the lives of each generation of women to varying extents and in different constellations.

In Dorothy's first-person accounts we learn that, when studying at Girton College, Cambridge in 1898 and unable to achieve an official degree because of her sex, she perceives her higher education as another version of women's institutional (and literal) incarceration rather than a glimpse toward their liberation: 'the Building Committee', she recalls, 'had originally considered iron bars for the girls [...] but these were sixty

For Peer Review

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pounds and so they counted on watchdogs' (Walbert, 2009: 59). Evelyn benefits from the strides made by her mother's generation and is determined to make her mark on the world of science. But despite the progress in women's access to education, she still faces challenges when she arrives in New York. Taught by a female professor, one of Evelyn's first lessons is: 'You must be fast [...] You must do things that much quicker than the boys do. And you must understand that you will do them alone, that no one will pay attention. If they do, they will not be pleased' (Walbert, 2009: 166). Even when she eventually takes up a position as a professor and teaches a new generation of aspiring female academics in the 1940s, Evelyn notes that their education continues to be treated as a privilege rather than a right: 'these scholarship girls have summer internships on campus – typing, filing – every hour repaying what has been given them in tuition' (Walbert, 2009: 170).

Evelyn's niece, Dorothy, marries young and at a time which, like the 1920s and 30s, 'saw the full flowering of the ideology of domesticity […] which Betty Friedan later dubbed "the feminine mystique"' (LeGates, 2001: 290). She soon feels she has lost her sense of self by being 'only' a mother, wondering, like her suffragette ancestor before her, 'Why couldn't she just be that?' (Walbert, 2009: 49). Her daughter Caroline, however, grows up with the rights that the Women's Liberation Movement has afforded the female sex. Caroline 'read Susan Brownmiller [...], had made it into Yale [... as part

For Peer Review

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of] one of the first class of women to be allowed, and was soon to graduate magna cum laude' (Walbert, 2009: 214). Yet, she admits she was 'no one her mother would have imagined her to be' (Walbert 2009: 214) when she reflects on her affair with one of her male professors. Later, she is 'named VP only a few years out of business school' (Walbert, 2009: 222), and while her mother votes ideologically, for Caroline the professional is the political when she notes that she must 'consider [her] client base' (Walbert, 2009: 39) and compromise her political beliefs, regretting that she ever admitted to Dorothy she voted for George W. Bush. The complexities of her life and the choices she makes as a businesswoman and mother are not accommodated by the mother's feminism, or so the daughter feels. Caroline, then, embodies the figure of the postfeminist woman, who 'navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship' (Genz, 2010: 98).

For Peer Review

But Caroline's professional life also witnesses inequalities that resonate with her mother's and grandmother's concerns over women's negotiation of life beyond the domestic sphere. This becomes particularly evident in the fact that, for childcare reasons, Caroline had to forfeit her position as VP of a company after her separation from her daughter's father. Liz, Caroline's sister and a mother of three, is able to return to her work as a potter for five hours a day between taking care of her children. Still, at

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a talk on 'Raising a Calm Child in the Age of Anxiety: Or, How to Let Go and Lighten Up' (Walbert, 2009: 177) which Liz attends at her daughter's school, the room is filled with a 'throng of mothers [and] the few stay-at-home dads or those fathers whose schedules allowed them to be flexible' (Walbert, 2009: 184). Clearly the ability to have it all – family and career – comes at a cost, with the ability 'to let go and lighten up' only accessible to a select few, and only with professional training at that. Caroline and Liz, then, lack the agency Stéphanie Genz ascribes to the figure of the postfeminist woman. Heterosexuality and financial privileges render it possible to '[rearticulate and blur] the binary distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogeneous definitions of postfeminist subjectivity' (Genz, 2010: 98). Yet without this constellation it is far less easy to combine motherhood with a career. Caroline, after her divorce, gives up her successful career and thus struggles to 'reconcile her experiences of being female, feminine, and feminist without falling apart or having to abandon one integral part of her existence' (Genz, 2010: 98–9).

For Peer Review

These issues are overshadowed time and time again by what repeatedly is considered a more important cause: war. In the time leading up to the First World War, Dorothy finds herself dissatisfied with the suffragettes' declining focus on the vote. At a fundraising event, she observes how the women at her table 'wear the requisite lavender, or cream

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in support of woman's suffrage, though their attentions have been diverted to war [...] their labor evidence of their patriotic intent and good, bloody conscience' (Walbert, 2009: 20–1). Approaching her cause without compromise, Dorothy objects to Millicent Fawcett's call that 'the best course of action for suffragists was to do all they could for the war effort, simultaneously supporting the country in its hour of need and demonstrating the degree to which women deserved the vote' (Smith, 2005: 71). Yet, she also asks whether 'she's too hard on all of them' (Walbert, 2009: 19), and whether 'to advance [men's] comfort is her job. She could do that, couldn't she? Be useful that way. Women want to be useful, after all, and young boys are dying' (Walbert, 2009: 29). Unable to accept this definition of a woman's duty she continues her fight for the vote through hunger strike, 'her Votes for Women sash like some kind of badge from an undeclared war' (Walbert, 2009: 78).

Dorothy repeatedly expresses her feelings of guilt at continuing her protest while soldiers are dying in battle, and internalises the notion that her actions are as – if not more – cruel than the war. Like the soldiers, Dorothy is willing to give her life for her cause, but it is her fight which is deemed selfish and inconsiderate, 'brought on by modern ideas, pride, a certain vanity or rather unreasonable expectations' (Walbert, 2009: 76): 'It is brutal, unimaginable, to think of what she is doing, what she has already done to the children […] Could she explain to them that she had no other

For Peer Review

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choice? That she had nothing else to sacrifice but her life?' (Walbert, 2009: 69). Shortly before her death, she is told by a hospital attendant that the drip connected to her veins is 'intended for dying soldiers [… and is] wasted on a woman by her own hand' (Walbert, 2009: 3). Dorothy's death and, by extension, women's struggle for equality, must thus give way to an event perceived as more important and worthy, a war caused, led and fought by more deserving men, an effect which repeats itself in each of the lives of Dorothy's successors, all of whom are, at some stage, faced by the fact that 'war is a man-made institution' (Walbert, 2009: 132).

Evelyn's work, too, is impacted by war, if in a different way. Having become a professor in chemistry, Evelyn does manage to be heard and receives recognition for her work. Nevertheless, just as Dorothy's actions were overshadowed by the First World War, a celebratory talk for Evelyn's first *Science* cover is cancelled in 1945 due to the surrender of the Japanese in the Second World War. Over half a century later, Liz lives in post 9/11 New York, where at schools 'emergency contact cards have been filed in triplicate' and 'each child has an individual first-aid kit and a protective mask' (Walbert, 2009: 185). Here, military discourse extends to the definition of a mother's relationship to her child's education. The school is, Liz tells us, 'one of those places where mothers are kept on their toes and organized into various committees for advance and retreat, their children's education understood as a battlefield that must be properly

For Peer Review

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assaulted' (Walbert, 2009: 177). A mother's purpose, then, are her children and the wars of the domestic sphere, whose existence and safety are threatened and, ironically, also supposedly protected by the global battles of the male domain which, as in previous decades, relegate feminist concerns.

Perhaps not the most obvious but certainly the most pertinent commonality between the five generations of women represented in the novel is the continuing – sometimes internalised – association between mental illness and feminist protest. If 'hystories' (Showalter, 1997: 7), to use Elaine Showalter's terminology, are the histories of hysteria, then *A Short History of Women* reflects on the writing of these histories within the context of feminism, and particularly feminist activism. In the course of the *fin de siècle* feminism and hysteria became synonyms (Showalter, [1985] 2007: 162–4), and in 1914 Dorothy's 'pursuit of dying' is expressed only implicitly in the papers because of 'the hysterical and copycat tendencies of the Women's Social and Political Union' (Walbert, 2009: 78–9). Evelyn reads her mother's actions as disempowering rather than as a successful act of rebellion, reminding us of the uneasy relationship feminist theory has to the figure of the madwoman. Evelyn recalls how starving for suffrage literally made her mother voiceless, how there was initially a time 'when she was still speaking, or when she still could be heard, before she twisted into a shape reserved for cracked sticks and hard as that [...] Then I gave up like Mum did and went quiet' (Walbert,

For Peer Review

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2009: 3). Later in life, too, she is unable to acknowledge her mother's suicide as a form of resistance: 'No one will remember you, I want to say to her. No one' (Walbert, 2009: 93–4). Here, what is being labelled as hysteria by opponents of feminism does not function as an effective alternative to patriarchal structures. Rather, Dorothy's form of protest 'ultimately traps the woman in silence' (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998: 4), 'duplicating the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first place' (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998: 2). If death is the ultimate form of silence, then the question of the efficacy of Dorothy's hunger strike looms large over her final sacrifice, not only for her daughter but also for subsequent generations of women.

For Peer Review

Dorothy's granddaughter and namesake is disillusioned with the political landscape at the turn of the twenty-first century and admires that her suffragette ancestor starved to death on principle' (Walbert, 2009: 38). Yet, her daughter Caroline considers her great-grandmother's behaviour as a potential symptom of hysteria: '"Anyway, you said she might have been unbalanced. A bit insane, wasn't she? You've said that before. She might have been suffering from –" "Hysteria?" Dorothy said, hearing her own tone of voice – hysterical' (Walbert, 2009: 38). To Caroline, activism – pacifist, feminist or otherwise – is associated with women who cannot 'find another project' (Walbert, 2009: 47), who lack purpose in their lives. This association of women's political activism with mental illness recurs when Dorothy, protesting against the Iraq War, describes how

soldiers talk to her: 'Clearly there's a manual on How to Speak to the Protesters and/or the Criminally Insane' (Walbert, 2009: 43).

When we meet Caroline's daughter, Dorothy 'Dora' Barrett-Deel, in a mediated fashion via her social media profile, we are reminded of the ambiguity and, perhaps, potential of these discourses of hysteria, and also encounter, once again, a virtual space where past and present meet and blur. The youngest Dorothy is a student at Yale who lists authors such as Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath as her favourite writers (Walbert, 2009: 225), quoting also Anais Nin, the French diarist and erotica writer. In her 'About Me' section, Dora readily acknowledges: 'My great-great-grandmother starved herself for suffrage. Color me Revolutionary' (Walbert, 2009: 225). Together with Dora's reading habits, this casual but nevertheless public acknowledgement of her association with her suffragette relative indicates that Dorothy Trevor Townsend's rebellious spirit lives on in her great-great-granddaughter. But with her reading of Woolf and Plath, and her choice of nickname, so does the undercurrent of mental instability which runs through the novel's stories, generation after generation. Dora Maar, after whom the young student has named herself, suffered a nervous breakdown after her nearly ten-year affair with Pablo Picasso, and after treatment by Jacques Lacan she proceeded to live as a recluse until her death in 1997 (Caws, 2000). Dorothy, then, appears to engage with and selectively appropriate feminist writers of the

For Peer Review

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past as well as the identity of her suffragette foremother and the discourses of madness that have accompanied her and subsequent generations' activism.

A closer look at the themes that shape the lives of the novel's women further reveals its concern with the limitations and potentials of the genealogical methods that feminist historiography has come to employ so persistently and extensively over the past decades. For Hemmings, generational discourse 'is a way of glossing over political and theoretical tensions otherwise less easily displaced' (2010: 147). Yet, *A Short History of Women* uses it to interrogate – rather than gloss over – exactly those tensions and the historical developments and individual circumstances out of which they arise. At the same time, our attention is drawn to the recurrence and perhaps not so surprising longevity of the issues that have continued to occupy feminists since the nineteenth century.

For Peer Review

The Future of Feminism's Family Drama

The significance of Walbert's female and feminist genealogies is multidimensional. All of the women we meet are variously engaged in acts of burying, uncovering, negotiating, and revaluing their matrilineal past as well as struggling to unite their feminist politics with their everyday lives, particularly their domestic and professional roles. The histories Walbert writes are not narratives of either commonality or

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individualism, sameness or difference. While their conflicts with one another serve to highlight the limiting and problematic effects of the mother-daughter trope in feminist history, it is also the novel's genealogies that allow us recognise the commonalities between women across the centuries. In doing so, *A Short History of Women* follows feminism's self-reflexive turn by seeking 'to map out and assess which different pieces in the jigsaw of feminism get picked up and why; […] who is selecting the fragments, and whose particular interests their delivery serves' (Segal, 2001: 57). On a metafictional level, then, the novel reflects on the effects the matrophor has had on the politics of feminist storytelling at the same time as it functions as a historiographic comment on the narrative methods feminist history has employed. Walbert neither naively adopts the notion of feminist generations, nor does she dismiss it as a futile means of narrativising and making sense of feminist histories. Instead, we are prompted to 'try to think through its signification rather than abandoning it at the outset' (Henry, 2004: 11).

For Peer Review

Like so many examples of women's historical fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, *A Short History of Women* is as much about 'moving forward' (Heilmann and Llewellyn, 2007: 11) as it is about looking back, not least because it participates in the feminist project of (re)writing history at the same as reflecting on the processes and methods which are involved in such political acts. Feminist genealogies are both fruitful

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and fraught, restrictive and liberating, but they are inescapable. Evelyn discovers this in the moving final lines of the novel, on her own deathbed, in her memories of her mother, the starving, hospitalised suffragette whom for her entire life she tried so hard to reject: 'I climb into bed with her, into that place where she is and if I get caught, if I am found here, I am sorry, I will tell them: There is nowhere else to be' (Walbert, 2009: 237). Evelyn's connection to her biological mother, to her matrilineal history, ultimately is as inescapable as the figurative genealogies of feminist historiography. This recognition is laden with potential rather than complacency or defeat. Paradoxically, Walbert demonstrates that we can appropriate generational narratives in order to critically think across feminist genealogies and beyond feminism's family drama, and while maintaining sight, too, of the root causes of gender inequality, rather than seeking an enemy within.

For Peer Review

Notes

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[i] This choice of imagery – of a volcano, which can erupt repeatedly, and of lava, which spreads at a rapid pace after an eruption – is particularly suitable considering the multiple generations of women involved in this first wave of feminism between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1910s. New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand did employ wave metaphors, but not to the same effect as feminists of the 1960s and 70s.

[ii] Dora Maar (1907–1997), a Croatian-born photographer, was Picasso's muse for

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several years in the 1930s and 1940s. Maar suffered from mental health problems throughout her relationship with the famous painter, partly because of his treatment of her and partly because she discovered she was sterile (prompting Picasso's portrayal of her as 'Weeping Woman' in 1937). See: Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar with and without Picasso: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Mary Ann Caws, *Picasso's Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar* (London: Little, Brown Book Group, 2000); and James Lord, *Picasso and Dora: A Memoir* (London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

[iii] Such pieces are numerous, and examples include: Roxanne Harde and Erin Harde, 'Voices and Visions: A Mother and Daughter Discuss Coming to Feminism and Being Feminist', *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. by Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), pp.116–137; and Anne Firor Scott et al., 'Women's History in the New Millennium: A Conversation across Three 'Generations'', *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life Stories from the Academy*, ed. by Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson and Jennifer L. Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp.87–108.

[iv] See: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (London: Back Bay Books, 1993); Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993); Natasha Walter, *The New Feminism* (London: Virago, 1998); Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young*

For Peer Review

Woman's Challenge to the Old Feminist Order (New York: Warner Books, 1995).

[v] Over ten years later, Walter publicly changed her opinions on the relevance of second-wave feminist politics in the twenty-first century in *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism* (London: Virago, 2010).

[vi] See Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992).

[vii] See, for example: Diana Wallace, *The Woman's Historical Novel: British Women Writers, 1900–2000* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Jeannette King, *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Women's Writing* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005); Rosemary Erickson Johnsen, *Contemporary Feminist Historical Crime Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[vii] I discuss Waters's use of matrilineal narratives in relation to third-wave feminism in detail in: 'Not My Mother's Daughter: Matrilinealism, Third-Wave Feminism & Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2:2 (Winter 2009/10), 109-136.

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