



LJMU Research Online

Muller, N

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

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/1308/>

Article

Citation (please note it is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work)

Muller, N (2016) Feminism's Family Drama: Female Genealogies, Feminist Historiography, and Kate Walbert's A Short History of Women. Feminist Theory: an international interdisciplinary journal, 18 (2). ISSN 1741-2773

LJMU has developed [LJMU Research Online](#) for users to access the research output of the University more effectively. Copyright © and Moral Rights for the papers on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may download and/or print one copy of any article(s) in LJMU Research Online to facilitate their private study or for non-commercial research. You may not engage in further distribution of the material or use it for any profit-making activities or any commercial gain.

The version presented here may differ from the published version or from the version of the record. Please see the repository URL above for details on accessing the published version and note that access may require a subscription.

For more information please contact researchonline@ljmu.ac.uk

<http://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/>



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

Journal:	<i>Feminist Theory</i>
Manuscript ID:	FT-14-0059.R2
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	feminist history, women's fiction, historiographic metafiction, feminism, Kate Walbert
Abstract:	This article considers Kate Walbert's <i>A Short History of Women</i> (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.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

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

Nadine Muller (Liverpool John Moores University)

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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Astrid Henry speculates that ‘the 1990s may well be remembered as a decade defined
10 by the notion of feminist generations’ (2004: 3), a concept which had become so
11 prevalent by the turn of the millennium that Rebecca Dakin Quinn coined the term
12 ‘matrophor’ to denote ‘the persistent nature of maternal metaphors in feminism’ (1997:
13 179). Entwined with the image of feminist ‘waves’, the matrophor was first adopted by
14 the women’s movements in Britain and the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s. The first wave
15 employed images of eruption and ignition such as ‘volcanoes, lava, and fire’ (LeGates,
16 2001: 188) to characterise its work,ⁱ and initially neither American nor British second-
17 wave feminists looked to their nineteenth and early-twentieth-century predecessors. Yet,
18 they soon ‘began to identify the previous century’s movement as their history and their
19 political foundation’ (Henry, 2004: 57–8). On both sides of the Atlantic feminists
20 established a generational and familial framework that, through the wave metaphor and
21 the matrophor, categorised feminist activities at the turn of the twentieth century and of
22 the 1960s and 70s as ‘two moments in the same movement’ (Henry, 2004: 53). The
23 generational concept has since dominated discourses of feminism’s history, and has
24 become a common means of describing historical shifts in feminist theory, politics, and
25 activism. Clare Hemmings suggests that in the first decade of the twenty-first century a
26 particular increase in the use of and focus on feminist generations occurred, a
27 development which, she speculates, ‘may also be an effect of the postmillennium
28 moment’ (2011: 236).
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Born in New York City in 1961 and a creative writing lecturer at Yale University until
10 2005, Kate Walbert's publishing career began at this point in feminist history with a
11 collection of short stories titled *Where She Went* (1998). In *A Short History of Women*
12 (2009) she fictionally explores this genealogical conception of feminist history through
13 the fragmented narratives of five generations of women. In a series of disjointed short
14 stories connected principally through the shared lineage of their female protagonists, we
15 meet – not in chronological order – Dorothy Trevor (later Trevor Townsend), a
16 Cambridge graduate and suffragette, and her daughter Evelyn, who lives through the
17 two world wars and becomes a chemistry professor in the U.S. Evelyn's niece, Dorothy
18 Townsend Barrett, takes part in consciousness raising groups in the 1970s, divorces her
19 husband, develops an interest in Florence Nightingale, protests against the Iraq War and
20 starts blogging at the age of 78. Her daughters are Caroline and Elizabeth: the former a
21 divorcee who struggles to comprehend her mother's political actions; the latter a
22 married potter and busy mother of three, living in an anxiety-ridden post 9/11 New
23 York City. The youngest generation in this family tree is Caroline's daughter Dorothy, a
24 Yale student who chooses to be known as Dora, taking her inspiration from Picasso's
25 mistress and muse Dora Maar.ⁱⁱ Walbert's novel is inherently concerned with the ways
26 in which these women's stories are connected to each other, and with the ways in which
27 they are all, to varying extents and in wildly different ways, shaped by the narrative of
28 their suffragette foremother.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 This essay considers *A Short History of Women* as a work of historiographic metafiction
10 that explores both the potentials and perils of genealogical approaches to feminist
11 historiography. Thus expanding and connecting theoretical and literary scholarship on
12 historiography. Thus expanding and connecting theoretical and literary scholarship on
13 the feminist mother-daughter trope, it first reviews the concept of feminist generations –
14 the matrophor – as a historiographic method, investigating its history in feminist
15 discourse, and its empowering as well as limiting potential for feminist narratives. In the
16 second part of my analysis, I turn to the context of contemporary women’s writing in
17 particular, situating Walbert’s novel and its genealogies within a tradition of feminist
18 historiographic metafiction that interrogates feminism’s own methods and practices in
19 writing the history of the movement, and of women. The article’s final part steers away
20 from the novel’s historiographic techniques and towards the politics of the female and
21 feminist (hi)stories it (re)writes. The novel’s matrilineal narratives, I suggest, revisit the
22 cyclical nature of feminist issues in the Western world, including the recurring
23 discourses of hysteria that became attached to feminist activism in the nineteenth
24 century and the persistent perils of women’s negotiation between their domestic and
25 professional identities, while also tracing the history of women’s education.
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46 **Genealogical Strategies in Feminist Historiography**

47
48 For second-wave feminists, designating the women’s movements of the nineteenth and
49 early-twentieth centuries as their foremothers enabled them to locate their cause ‘within
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 the longer trajectory of feminism's history' (Henry, 2004: 58) and to 'validate feminism
10 at a time when it was often ridiculed as silly and not politically serious' (Henry, 2004:
11 53). However, unlike the close generational connection between second and third-wave
12 feminism upon which the mother-daughter dyad can be mapped with relative ease and
13 to which it often applies literally, the relationship second wavers established between
14 themselves and the first wave 'cannot so easily be represented as familial' (Henry,
15 2004: 3). Consequently, in order to designate their political heritage in the women's
16 movement of the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, feminists of the 1960s
17 and 70s first had to denounce the 'wasted generation' (Firestone, 1970: 15) of their
18 biological mothers by committing psychological matricide (Chesler, 1997: 55).
19 Claiming that feminism died after 1914 instead of 'recognizing the ways in which [it]
20 continued to exist [... and] may have been transformed' (Henry, 2004: 71) after many
21 suffragettes had given up their struggle at the onset of the First World War, second
22 wavers were able to claim that feminism was 'reborn' with their movement (Henry,
23 2004: 66). Paradoxically, to establish their place in feminist history and reinforce the
24 validity of their concerns, they felt the need to relinquish their biological mothers' and
25 their grandmothers' generations in order to claim their matrilineage in the more distant
26 past and, therefore, their identities as feminists in the present. In this instance, then, the
27 matrophor's problematic emphasis on age difference (between mother and daughter)
28 proves self-defeating to the project of feminist history as it facilitates the exclusion of
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 these biological mothers, that is, of four decades of women.

10
11
12 Continuing the utilisation of the matrophor, third-wave feminists have profited from its
13 use in similar ways to their forerunners. By representing their feminism as part of an
14 ongoing history of political struggle, ‘this generation enters into feminism through both
15 rejecting the imagined post-feminism of their immediate predecessors (and some of
16 their peers) and reclaiming the feminism of the early second wave’ (Henry, 2004: 26).
17
18 One obvious but crucial difference to the second wave’s relationship with its feminist
19 foremothers is that women of the third wave are contemporaries – and often both the
20 biological as well as figurative daughters – of the second-wave generation (who
21 themselves were much less likely to have to face their chosen foremothers directly).
22
23 This generational proximity has facilitated dialogue between feminists of both waves,
24 and since the turn of the millennium cross-generational conversation has become a
25 popular form in feminist scholarship in particular.ⁱⁱⁱ While such pieces usually illustrate
26 second and third-wave feminists’ perceived similarities and differences within a context
27 of mutual respect as well as scrutiny, they also frequently highlight the assumptions and
28 constructions on which each wave’s perception of the other is founded, that is, the ways
29 in which women construct images of their feminist mothers and daughters in
30 accordance with or in contrast to their perceptions of themselves.
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 During its earlier years in particular, the emergence of a new, third wave also prompted
10 some writers to declare their outright rejection of their second-wave mothers, and,
11 indeed, a perceived superiority over them. Some feminist writers of the 1990s, including
12 Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, and shortly after also Rene Denfeld and Natasha Walter,
13 strove to represent the second wave as outdated and their politics as inappropriate for
14 the cultural landscape of the late-twentieth-century Western world.^{iv} As Imelda
15 Whelehan puts it, for these women ‘the more potent legacies of feminism lie forgotten
16 and the Second Wave comes instead to be remembered as that of whining victimhood
17 and passivity’ (2005: 166). Once again, then, the feminist mother is identified as old
18 and unsuitable, serving as a means to emphasise the daughter’s embodiment of
19 innovation and improvement, even leading Walter to baptise her particular brand of the
20 movement as ‘the *new* feminism’ (1998: 4),^v and Roiphe to feel as though feminism
21 was ‘a stern mother telling her how to behave’ (Henry, 2004: 5).
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 While the third wave, due to its proximity to a previous feminist generation, has no need
41 to commit the psychological matricide the second wave considered necessary, third
42 wavers nevertheless have felt the need to reject the decade which by now has become
43 almost universally identified as a period of backlash, a time when feminism, once again,
44 was dead: the 1980s.^{vi} Emulating the exclusion from feminist historical records which
45 the second wave had forced upon the period between the 1920s and 1960s, the third
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 wave's use of a generational framework and its construction of the 80s as an era of
10
11 backlash means that women who were in their twenties and thirties during this decade
12
13 'can be understood as neither "mothers" nor "daughters" within feminism's imagined
14
15 family structure' (Henry, 2004: 27). Therefore, they must 'be metaphorically exiled
16
17 from feminism's family' (Henry, 2004: 4) in order for the third wave to establish itself
18
19 as the (sometimes proud and at other times embarrassed) progeny of the second. These
20
21 selective acts of rejection and identification with their respective biological and
22
23 figurative foremothers, then, can be read as a manifestation of what Adrienne Rich has
24
25 termed 'matrophobia': an attempt at rejection which is predicated upon the fear of an
26
27 already established (although not necessarily consciously acknowledged) identification.
28
29 Matrophobia is the 'fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of *becoming one's*
30
31 *mother*', caused by 'a deep underlying pull toward her, a dread that if one relaxes one's
32
33 guard one will identify with her completely' (Rich, 1976: 236). Like Diana Fuss's
34
35 notion of 'disidentification' (1995: 7), Rich's concept describes 'an identification that
36
37 one fears to make only because one has already made it' (Fuss, 1995: 7).
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 The matrophor – as a means of conceptualising and chronicling the (ongoing) history of
45
46 feminism and its developments – has attracted both support and criticism, of course.
47
48 Besides its controversial replication of positivist understandings of history in which
49
50 each generation improves upon the former, the matrophor imposes further restrictions
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 on feminism, forever implying that feminists can never be anything but mothers and
10 daughters and that their relationship to each other is confined to the paradigm of the
11 familial family, that traditional conception of which feminism has so often challenged.
12 Thus limiting the possible connections between women, the matrilineal metaphor does
13 not allow for 'various ideological and political differences among and between
14 feminists and feminisms, reducing such differences to the singular difference of age and
15 generation' (Henry, 2004: 182). A genealogical understanding of feminist history and
16 the classifications by age it purports arguably become self-defeating to the feminist
17 project as they exclude entire generations of women from feminism's imagined family
18 tree. In addition to exclusion, exclusion the matrophor also encourages competition
19 rather than collaboration. Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford suggest that the notion of
20 feminist generations means women are 'set up in competition with one another' (2004:
21 176), an issue which ultimately 'paralyses feminism' (2004: 165) and renders familial
22 metaphors 'merely another tool of the backlash' (2004: 178). Simultaneously, feminists'
23 focus on their own generational differences can lead to the dangerous assumption that
24 'feminism itself [...] has become the enemy' (Henry, 2004: 39), and that within the
25 figurative feminist family, mothers and daughters then tend to forget its 'absent father'
26 (Henry, 2004: 183). These issues then perpetually repeat themselves in the form of a
27 family drama, as Hemmings points out: 'Generational logic [...] represents the past and
28 present through generational struggles within a *family drama*, as inevitable and bound
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 to be reproduced with each successive “generation” (original italics, 2011: 148).

10
11 Yet, by enabling women to establish a feminist genealogy and, thus, history, the
12 matrilineal metaphor can also facilitate empowering cross-historical identification for
13 feminist ‘daughters’ by ‘granting them authority and a generational location from which
14 to speak’ (Henry, 2004: 3). Like other familial concepts, the matrophor can potentially
15 contribute to the articulation of conflicts between feminist groups and generations, ‘not
16 exacerbat[ing] tensions so much as [... helping] to get a handle on them’ (Fraiman,
17 1999: 527). Gillis and Munford rightly criticise the problematic encouragement of
18 competition, but arguably matrilineal conceptions of feminism can also enable
19 communication, negotiation, and collaboration. Equally, while the marine imagery of
20 tides and waves carries problematic connotations of periodical retreat, the mother-
21 daughter concept frames feminism as hereditary and potentially lasting, as something
22 that can be nurtured, passed on, and adapted by each generation.
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 **Fictionalising Feminist Historiography**

41
42 It is in contemporary women’s fiction that we find the most imaginative and fruitful
43 exploration of the perils and potentials of matrilineal narratives as a feminist
44 historiographic tool. Since the 1990s in particular ‘feminist discourses within and
45 outside the academy have taken a self-reflexive turn’ (Siegel, 1997: 59), a development
46 which also applies to the highly self-conscious fiction that arose in the 1960s and 1970s,
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 and which arguably has come into its own both in terms of popularity and literary
10 sophistication since the end of the twentieth century, not least in the works of A. S.
11 Byatt and Sarah Waters, among others. At the same time as feminists have been
12 exploring methods of feminist storytelling in their scholarship, women writers have
13 adopted the genre of historical fiction to trace women's histories and the ways they may
14 have shaped female lives in the present day. Historical fiction – that is, fiction that is set
15 partly or wholly in the more distant past – has long been recognised for its potential to
16 make inventive and impactful contributions to the feminist historiographic project.^{vii}
17
18 Historiographic metafiction, 'those well-known and popular novels which are both
19 intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and
20 personages' (Hutcheon, 1988: 5), have the ability both to redress narrative perspectives
21 that previously privileged male-centred and male-authored versions of history and to
22 reflect on the process of history writing itself (Hutcheon, 1988: 5). This kind of fiction
23 can function as 'part of the wider project, pioneered by second wave feminism, of
24 rewriting history from a female perspective, and recovering the lives of women who
25 have been excluded and marginalised' (King, 2005: 3–4).
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45

46 Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, consciously and explicitly
47 'attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical [...]
48 both thematically and formally' (1988: 108) by challenging history's claim to truth 'in
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human
10 constructs, signifying systems' (1988: 93). At a time when feminism turns a critical eye
11 on its own narrative practices, the genre lends itself to feminist historiographic enquiry
12 and to the creation of a feminist metanarrative, a potential which authors of neo-
13 Victorian fiction in particular have mined. A. S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990) is perhaps
14 one of the best-known examples here, with a female-centred plot that rewrites the
15 nineteenth-century past while at the same time interrogating our ways of constructing
16 historical and scholarly histories of women authors and their lives. Sarah Blake's
17 *Grange House* (2006), too, is concerned with the ways in which the act of writing
18 allows us to access, manipulate, and question our relationship to the past, and in
19 particular to women's matrilineal narratives. Equally, Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*
20 (2002) is entirely preoccupied with the status and effect of female genealogies on the
21 plot's female protagonists, whose actions are entirely driven by their mothers'
22 identities.^{viii}
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

42 While Walbert's *A Short History of Women* shares some of the same concerns as these
43 and other examples of women's historiographic metafiction, it is different in that it also
44 seeks to self-consciously explore the history of feminism itself. This novel acts as a
45 space in which 'the multiple histories of feminisms must be written, critiqued, and
46 rewritten [...] to effectively disrupt false boundaries and to destabilize traditional,
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 monolithic history to expose diverse and often opposing experiences and positions'
10 (Steenbergen, 2006: 177–8). It does so through its fictionalised narrative of the female
11 descendants of suffragette Dorothy Trevor Townsend in the twentieth and into the
12 twenty-first centuries. Walbert's text is an exercise in feminist historiography at the
13 same time as it also functions as a critical commentary on it, looking to those who –
14 because of the limitations of generational thinking within feminism – have been
15 excluded and marginalised through the genealogical historiographic methods.
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23

24
25
26 The First World War, as historians have frequently noted, marked the beginning of the
27 end for the struggle for women's suffrage and the first-wave feminist movement. The
28 common perception is that 'the majority of feminists in all countries placed war
29 activities before suffrage work' (LeGates, 2001: 283), and the subsequent inter-war
30 years have been characterised widely by 'the absence of highly visible and effective
31 organized feminist movements' (LeGates, 2001: 281). Recently historians have
32 revisited and redressed such claims, and *A Short History of Women* also questions from
33 the outset the definitions of feminism's various ends and beginnings, deaths and
34 (re)births. For Walbert, 'history [...] is textual: constantly shifting, continually in
35 production, and always open to question' (Steenbergen, 2006: 177). The novel neither
36 opens in the heyday of feminist activism nor with an account by a suffragette. Rather,
37 we are introduced to Dorothy Trevor Townsend in 1914, in the early days of the First
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 World War, through the perspective of her young daughter Evelyn, whom we first meet
10 when she recollects her mother's deathbed, remarking: 'Mum starved herself for
11 suffrage' (Walbert, 2009: 3). The story begins with what appears to be an end – the
12 imminent death of a feminist mother and, by extension, of the first generation of the
13 feminist movement – while at the same time introducing us to a figure who marks a
14 beginning – Dorothy's daughter. Walbert's narrative thus highlights, questions, and
15 rewrites the artificial temporal demarcations of feminist history.
16
17

18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26 Indeed, from hereon in the novel's structure further defies its genealogical premise.
27
28 Rather than tracing the branches of Dorothy's family tree chronologically, Walbert
29 presents us with a fragmented narrative that skips forward and backward between
30 different generations of women. Each chapter forms part of a fragmented yet connected
31 whole, meaning we are prompted to compare not only the lives of adjacent generations
32 but also to draw parallels and recognise differences across decades and centuries.
33
34 Paradoxically, at the same time as the novel capitalises on a female genealogy by using
35 it to explore feminist histories; its temporally disordered structure also dissects and
36 reconfigures the familial trope that has become so central to feminist historiography. *A*
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
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).

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 Dorothy Townsend Barrett – named after her suffragette grandmother – is the only child
10 of Evelyn’s brother, and her narrative, too, problematises genealogical accounts of
11 feminism. Born in 1930 and part of the generation which fell victim to the second-
12 wave’s matricide, Dorothy takes part in rap sessions in the 1970s, but feels that as a
13 woman in her early forties ‘she cannot keep up with the modern, liberated’ generation
14 (Walbert, 2009: 120). She senses that there is an absence in her own history, a
15 perception that reflects the silence surrounding her generation in many accounts of the
16 feminist movement’s story: ‘I feel like a hollow bone [...] as if I echo, or rather, feel in
17 myself an absence [...] as if I’ve forgotten something, as if there’s a question I’ve
18 forgotten to answer’ (Walbert, 2009: 151). Dorothy’s narrative represents a perspective
19 that is ‘frequently absent from recent discourse on feminism’s (seemingly two)
20 generations’ (Henry, 2004: 4). To redress these silences in feminist historiography
21 further, Walbert includes the narrative of Evelyn, chronicling her life during the 1930s
22 and 40s, a period omitted from feminism’s wave structure and often perceived as an ebb
23 of feminist activity in Britain and America. For Evelyn, her mother’s death was, like for
24 many of her contemporaries, not an act of heroism or strength, but rather quite the
25 opposite, a sign of weakness and a way of giving up. Evelyn is surrounded by voices
26 which disapprove of her mother’s actions, a sign of the period in which feminism, ‘to
27 the generation of young women who came of age in the 1920s’ (Henry, 2004: 19),
28 seemed no longer relevant.
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11 At the same time, however, the suffragette's daughter is also told by remaining family
12 members that she resembles her mother, that she is 'a fighter [...] just like her, and
13 stubborn as a goat, and wilful and determined and entirely lacking [...] in female wiles'
14 (Walbert, 2009: 14), that she has 'inherited Mum's will, not to mention her temper',
15 something which she recalls her aunt saying 'could either float me in good stead or kill
16 me' (Walbert, 2009: 12). When the mathematically-gifted Evelyn leaves for New York
17 to take up a refugee scholarship at Barnard College, she intends to become a 'blank
18 slate' (Walbert, 2009: 97). She rejects her association with her mother and with her
19 mother's cause, reassuring enquirers and herself: "'No relation," [...] I have sworn I'll
20 start from nothing; that I am now no one's daughter' (Walbert, 2009: 92). For Evelyn,
21 the denunciation of the women's movement is a denunciation of what she perceives as
22 the cause of her mother's death. This disidentification with Dorothy becomes most
23 pertinent when, having paid for her journey to the US, she finds herself unable to
24 purchase food aboard the ship and, due to malnourishment, eventually faints upon her
25 arrival at Barnard College. Ironically, then, Evelyn replicates her mother's actions by
26 starving herself (if less intentionally) in order to take the opportunity to receive a
27 university education; that is, to pursue the path that the women of her mother's
28 generation paved for her. And while Evelyn's matricide and matrophobia are evident,
29 her life choices and politics are anything but a rejection of the desire for equality that
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 propelled her mother. Though not part of an organised women's movement, Evelyn's
10 life and career illustrate a commitment to gender equality and to feminism, both through
11 her academic achievements in the male-dominated field of science and in her function
12 as a mentor to female students. Evelyn's story, then, prompts us to 'take into account
13 the variety of ways in which feminism can flourish' (LeGates, 2001: 282), even at a
14 time when the very term seemed to almost disappear entirely (LeGates, 2001: 281).
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23

24 But not all of the suffragette's female ancestors try to eradicate their connection to their
25 personal past. Dorothy, Evelyn's niece, researches her suffragette grandmother and has
26 the desire 'to flaunt the new lineage, to be the lineage [... and] stand for something
27 other than mother' (Walbert, 2009: 49). She seeks a new sense of self beyond
28 motherhood and marriage, and does so by looking back to the past, to Florence
29 Nightingale, but also to her own family history. What to Evelyn was the traumatic
30 experience of her mother's self-inflicted death is, to Dorothy, a selfless sacrifice: her
31 suffragette predecessor 'had given her life so that women might, quite simply, do
32 something' (Walbert, 2009: 129–30). For Dorothy, her grandmother's suicide functions
33 as a powerful message rather than a self-defeating, silent act: 'it changed things then
34 [...] to do something', she remarks; 'she made up her mind; she took a stand [...] The
35 point is she did something' (Walbert 2009: 38). Here, the keys to a female – and indeed
36 to a feminist – identity in the present are lineage and history: 'One must always look for
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8 antecedents [...] You have to start somewhere' (Walbert, 2009: 130). Here, the literal
9 and figurative foremother – in this instance in the form of a grandmother – signals 'a
10 way to a powerful female past' (Cosslett, 1996: 8) that inspires, legitimises, and enables
11 female and feminist identities of the present.
12
13
14
15
16

17
18
19 When we discover that in her late seventies Dorothy begins to write and publish a blog
20 'on Florence Nightingale, Old Age, and Life' (Walbert, 2009: 108), we do so not
21 through Dorothy's but through her daughter Caroline's narrative voice. One of Yale's
22 first women graduates, a rape helpline volunteer, and successful business woman,
23 Caroline's feminism is arguably a more pragmatic one than that of her mother, and the
24 two find themselves at odds politically. When Dorothy stages one-woman protests
25 against the Iraq War and is consequently imprisoned several times only to be bailed out
26 by Caroline, her daughter urges her to 'get a life' (Walbert, 2009: 38), while the mother,
27 in turn, is frustrated with what she perceives as the political apathy of her daughter's
28 generation. As Hemmings suggests, this effect of feminist genealogies is a common one
29 and leads to feminist loss narratives (2011: 147) in which, to the 'mother', 'the past [...]
30 was brighter and more political; [and] the present and future are doomed' (2011: 147).
31 There is, then, a nostalgic longing in Dorothy's acts of looking backward. Although the
32 novel as a whole resists tendencies to either reject or romanticise the past, in the case of
33 Dorothy a matrilineal conception of feminist history seemingly discourages a positive
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8 engagement with the movement's present.
9
10

11
12
13 Ironically, Caroline becomes aware of Dorothy's blog when, not for the first time, she
14 searches the internet for 'the original Dorothy' (Walbert, 2009: 207). Hoping to find
15 more than the 'various footnotes of current scholarship' she has memorised already, she
16 instead encounters her mother's online identity. To Caroline and her sister Liz, the idea
17 that Dorothy participates in an interactive online culture does not resonate with her
18 maternal role. DT (Dorothy's screen name), is 'a woman once her mother, a blogger'
19 (Walbert, 2009: 210), identities which are, in the daughters' views, incompatible. It is,
20 however, because of this virtual existence that Caroline finds it possible to engage with
21 her by responding to her posts – first anonymously, then self-identified through the
22 content of her replies – and thus enter into a dialogue with Dorothy about their lives,
23 their marriages, and those of Dorothy's concerns which cannot so easily be ascribed to
24 the maternal. Paradoxically, it is through Caroline's virtual act of psychological
25 matricide (or at least intentional oversight) in her quest for her great-grandmother that
26 she is confronted and can engage with Dorothy as a fellow mother, woman, and
27 feminist. It is only by temporarily laying off their familial identities and by assuming
28 virtual selves not defined by their familial tie that mother and daughter can
29 communicate outside of the generational paradigm and that each is encouraged to seek a
30 connection with the woman who shares her present as well as (and, importantly, not
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 instead of) looking for a foremother in the distant past. Thus, if ‘women’s cross-
10 generational relationships with one another can only be hostile’ (Hemmings, 2011: 148)
11 within the genealogical confines of the matrophor, they must be relinquished in order
12 for collaboration and productive dialogue to become a possibility.
13
14
15
16

17
18
19 Both Dorothy and Caroline originate from and seek the same foremother, and their
20 search for her – despite their different views on the suffragette’s actions – is what unites
21 them. The genealogical trope, in Walbert’s hands, becomes powerful when deployed to
22 unearth a feminist tradition; but when applied to feminists who co-exist in the same
23 present, and who share, at least partially, the same future, the matrophor becomes a
24 hindrance. Here, it leads to fragmentation and paralysis rather than collaborative action,
25 and limits the possible relationships between women to only one combination:
26 competition and conflict. Nevertheless, the novel’s fragmented matrilineal narratives
27 and their persistent preoccupation with the recurring gendered issues that impact on
28 each generation’s lived experiences also allow us – if not the protagonists themselves –
29 to also delve further into the positive potentials a genealogical approach to feminist
30 historiography can hold.
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47

48 **Feminist Histories: The Personal, the Political, and the Persistent**

49 If *A Short History of Women* is preoccupied with the relationships between feminist
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 generations and with the perils that accompany a genealogical approach to the histories
10 of feminism, it is also equally interested in the commonalities across generations that
11 such an approach may be able to highlight. In her discussion of the harmful effects of
12 generational conceptualisations of feminism, Hemmings suggests that ‘even where
13 differences of generation within feminism are positively viewed, it is the differences
14 between cohorts of feminists, rather than similarities across time and space, that are
15 emphasised and that are understood to mark generation as such’ (2011: 150). Walbert’s
16 text illustrates exactly this point, I would argue, but pays as much attention to the
17 similarities as to the differences between the generations of women whose lives it
18 sketches out. While certain economic, political, and cultural contexts – including access
19 to education and the professions – shift across the periods covered by the novel’s
20 narratives, they do not simply stop being problematic in subsequent decades or even
21 centuries. Instead, we are presented with recurring and indeed defining issues that affect
22 the lives of each generation of women to varying extents and in different constellations.
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

42 In Dorothy’s first-person accounts we learn that, when studying at Girton College,
43 Cambridge in 1898 and unable to achieve an official degree because of her sex, she
44 perceives her higher education as another version of women’s institutional (and literal)
45 incarceration rather than a glimpse toward their liberation: ‘the Building Committee’,
46 she recalls, ‘had originally considered iron bars for the girls [...] but these were sixty
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 pounds and so they counted on watchdogs' (Walbert, 2009: 59). Evelyn benefits from
10 the strides made by her mother's generation and is determined to make her mark on the
11 world of science. But despite the progress in women's access to education, she still
12 faces challenges when she arrives in New York. Taught by a female professor, one of
13 Evelyn's first lessons is: 'You must be fast [...] You must do things that much quicker
14 than the boys do. And you must understand that you will do them alone, that no one will
15 pay attention. If they do, they will not be pleased' (Walbert, 2009: 166). Even when she
16 eventually takes up a position as a professor and teaches a new generation of aspiring
17 female academics in the 1940s, Evelyn notes that their education continues to be treated
18 as a privilege rather than a right: 'these scholarship girls have summer internships on
19 campus – typing, filing – every hour repaying what has been given them in tuition'
20 (Walbert, 2009: 170).
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36

37 Evelyn's niece, Dorothy, marries young and at a time which, like the 1920s and 30s,
38 'saw the full flowering of the ideology of domesticity [...] which Betty Friedan later
39 dubbed "the feminine mystique"' (LeGates, 2001: 290). She soon feels she has lost her
40 sense of self by being 'only' a mother, wondering, like her suffragette ancestor before
41 her, 'Why couldn't she just be that?' (Walbert, 2009: 49). Her daughter Caroline,
42 however, grows up with the rights that the Women's Liberation Movement has afforded
43 the female sex. Caroline 'read Susan Brownmiller [...], had made it into Yale [... as part
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 of] one of the first class of women to be allowed, and was soon to graduate magna cum
10 laude' (Walbert, 2009: 214). Yet, she admits she was 'no one her mother would have
11 imagined her to be' (Walbert 2009: 214) when she reflects on her affair with one of her
12 male professors. Later, she is 'named VP only a few years out of business school'
13 (Walbert, 2009: 222), and while her mother votes ideologically, for Caroline the
14 professional is the political when she notes that she must 'consider [her] client base'
15 (Walbert, 2009: 39) and compromise her political beliefs, regretting that she ever
16 admitted to Dorothy she voted for George W. Bush. The complexities of her life and the
17 choices she makes as a businesswoman and mother are not accommodated by the
18 mother's feminism, or so the daughter feels. Caroline, then, embodies the figure of the
19 postfeminist woman, who 'navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her
20 feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional
21 career and personal relationship' (Genz, 2010: 98).
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 But Caroline's professional life also witnesses inequalities that resonate with her
41 mother's and grandmother's concerns over women's negotiation of life beyond the
42 domestic sphere. This becomes particularly evident in the fact that, for childcare
43 reasons, Caroline had to forfeit her position as VP of a company after her separation
44 from her daughter's father. Liz, Caroline's sister and a mother of three, is able to return
45 to her work as a potter for five hours a day between taking care of her children. Still, at
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 a talk on ‘Raising a Calm Child in the Age of Anxiety: Or, How to Let Go and Lighten
10 Up’ (Walbert, 2009: 177) which Liz attends at her daughter’s school, the room is filled
11 with a ‘throng of mothers [and] the few stay-at-home dads or those fathers whose
12 schedules allowed them to be flexible’ (Walbert, 2009: 184). Clearly the ability to have
13 it all – family and career – comes at a cost, with the ability ‘to let go and lighten up’
14 only accessible to a select few, and only with professional training at that. Caroline and
15 Liz, then, lack the agency Stéphanie Genz ascribes to the figure of the postfeminist
16 woman. Heterosexuality and financial privileges render it possible to ‘[rearticulate and
17 blur] the binary distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism
18 and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogeneous definitions of postfeminist
19 subjectivity’ (Genz, 2010: 98). Yet without this constellation it is far less easy to
20 combine motherhood with a career. Caroline, after her divorce, gives up her successful
21 career and thus struggles to ‘reconcile her experiences of being female, feminine, and
22 feminist without falling apart or having to abandon one integral part of her existence’
23 (Genz, 2010: 98–9).
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43

44 These issues are overshadowed time and time again by what repeatedly is considered a
45 more important cause: war. In the time leading up to the First World War, Dorothy finds
46 herself dissatisfied with the suffragettes’ declining focus on the vote. At a fundraising
47 event, she observes how the women at her table ‘wear the requisite lavender, or cream
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 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).

37 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

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 choice? That she had nothing else to sacrifice but her life?’ (Walbert, 2009: 69). Shortly
10
11 before her death, she is told by a hospital attendant that the drip connected to her veins
12
13 is ‘intended for dying soldiers [... and is] wasted on a woman by her own hand’
14
15 (Walbert, 2009: 3). Dorothy’s death and, by extension, women’s struggle for equality,
16
17 must thus give way to an event perceived as more important and worthy, a war caused,
18
19 led and fought by more deserving men, an effect which repeats itself in each of the lives
20
21 of Dorothy’s successors, all of whom are, at some stage, faced by the fact that ‘war is a
22
23 man-made institution’ (Walbert, 2009: 132).
24
25
26
27

28
29 Evelyn’s work, too, is impacted by war, if in a different way. Having become a
30
31 professor in chemistry, Evelyn does manage to be heard and receives recognition for her
32
33 work. Nevertheless, just as Dorothy’s actions were overshadowed by the First World
34
35 War, a celebratory talk for Evelyn’s first *Science* cover is cancelled in 1945 due to the
36
37 surrender of the Japanese in the Second World War. Over half a century later, Liz lives
38
39 in post 9/11 New York, where at schools ‘emergency contact cards have been filed in
40
41 triplicate’ and ‘each child has an individual first-aid kit and a protective mask’
42
43 (Walbert, 2009: 185). Here, military discourse extends to the definition of a mother’s
44
45 relationship to her child’s education. The school is, Liz tells us, ‘one of those places
46
47 where mothers are kept on their toes and organized into various committees for advance
48
49 and retreat, their children’s education understood as a battlefield that must be properly
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 assaulted' (Walbert, 2009: 177). A mother's purpose, then, are her children and the wars
10 of the domestic sphere, whose existence and safety are threatened and, ironically, also
11 supposedly protected by the global battles of the male domain which, as in previous
12 decades, relegate feminist concerns.
13
14
15
16

17
18
19 Perhaps not the most obvious but certainly the most pertinent commonality between the
20 five generations of women represented in the novel is the continuing – sometimes
21 internalised – association between mental illness and feminist protest. If 'hystories'
22 (Showalter, 1997: 7), to use Elaine Showalter's terminology, are the histories of
23 hysteria, then *A Short History of Women* reflects on the writing of these histories within
24 the context of feminism, and particularly feminist activism. In the course of the *fin de*
25 *siècle* feminism and hysteria became synonyms (Showalter, [1985] 2007: 162–4), and in
26 1914 Dorothy's 'pursuit of dying' is expressed only implicitly in the papers because of
27 'the hysterical and copycat tendencies of the Women's Social and Political Union'
28 (Walbert, 2009: 78–9). Evelyn reads her mother's actions as disempowering rather than
29 as a successful act of rebellion, reminding us of the uneasy relationship feminist theory
30 has to the figure of the madwoman. Evelyn recalls how starving for suffrage literally
31 made her mother voiceless, how there was initially a time 'when she was still speaking,
32 or when she still could be heard, before she twisted into a shape reserved for cracked
33 sticks and hard as that [...] Then I gave up like Mum did and went quiet' (Walbert,
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 2009: 3). Later in life, too, she is unable to acknowledge her mother's suicide as a form
10 of resistance: 'No one will remember you, I want to say to her. No one' (Walbert, 2009:
11 93-4). Here, what is being labelled as hysteria by opponents of feminism does not
12 function as an effective alternative to patriarchal structures. Rather, Dorothy's form of
13 protest 'ultimately traps the woman in silence' (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998: 4),
14 'duplicating the essentialist thinking that identifies women with irrationality in the first
15 place' (Caminero-Santangelo, 1998: 2). If death is the ultimate form of silence, then the
16 question of the efficacy of Dorothy's hunger strike looms large over her final sacrifice,
17 not only for her daughter but also for subsequent generations of women.
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29

30
31 Dorothy's granddaughter and namesake is disillusioned with the political landscape at
32 the turn of the twenty-first century and admires that her suffragette ancestor starved to
33 death on principle' (Walbert, 2009: 38). Yet, her daughter Caroline considers her great-
34 grandmother's behaviour as a potential symptom of hysteria: "“Anyway, you said she
35 might have been unbalanced. A bit insane, wasn't she? You've said that before. She
36 might have been suffering from –” “Hysteria?” Dorothy said, hearing her own tone of
37 voice – hysterical' (Walbert, 2009: 38). To Caroline, activism – pacifist, feminist or
38 otherwise – is associated with women who cannot 'find another project' (Walbert, 2009:
39 47), who lack purpose in their lives. This association of women's political activism with
40 mental illness recurs when Dorothy, protesting against the Iraq War, describes how
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 soldiers talk to her: 'Clearly there's a manual on How to Speak to the Protesters and/or
10 the Criminally Insane' (Walbert, 2009: 43).
11
12

13
14
15 When we meet Caroline's daughter, Dorothy 'Dora' Barrett-Deel, in a mediated fashion
16 via her social media profile, we are reminded of the ambiguity and, perhaps, potential of
17 these discourses of hysteria, and also encounter, once again, a virtual space where past
18 and present meet and blur. The youngest Dorothy is a student at Yale who lists authors
19 such as Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Adrienne Rich, and Sylvia Plath as her
20 favourite writers (Walbert, 2009: 225), quoting also Anais Nin, the French diarist and
21 erotica writer. In her 'About Me' section, Dora readily acknowledges: 'My great-great-
22 grandmother starved herself for suffrage. Color me Revolutionary' (Walbert, 2009:
23 225). Together with Dora's reading habits, this casual but nevertheless public
24 acknowledgement of her association with her suffragette relative indicates that Dorothy
25 Trevor Townsend's rebellious spirit lives on in her great-great-granddaughter. But with
26 her reading of Woolf and Plath, and her choice of nickname, so does the undercurrent of
27 mental instability which runs through the novel's stories, generation after generation.
28 Dora Maar, after whom the young student has named herself, suffered a nervous
29 breakdown after her nearly ten-year affair with Pablo Picasso, and after treatment by
30 Jacques Lacan she proceeded to live as a recluse until her death in 1997 (Caws, 2000).
31 Dorothy, then, appears to engage with and selectively appropriate feminist writers of the
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 past as well as the identity of her suffragette foremother and the discourses of madness
10 that have accompanied her and subsequent generations' activism.
11
12

13
14
15 A closer look at the themes that shape the lives of the novel's women further reveals its
16 concern with the limitations and potentials of the genealogical methods that feminist
17 historiography has come to employ so persistently and extensively over the past
18 decades. For Hemmings, generational discourse 'is a way of glossing over political and
19 theoretical tensions otherwise less easily displaced' (2010: 147). Yet, *A Short History of*
20 *Women* uses it to interrogate – rather than gloss over – exactly those tensions and the
21 historical developments and individual circumstances out of which they arise. At the
22 same time, our attention is drawn to the recurrence and perhaps not so surprising
23 longevity of the issues that have continued to occupy feminists since the nineteenth
24 century.
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39

40 **The Future of Feminism's Family Drama**

41 The significance of Walbert's female and feminist genealogies is multidimensional. All
42 of the women we meet are variously engaged in acts of burying, uncovering,
43 negotiating, and revaluing their matrilineal past as well as struggling to unite their
44 feminist politics with their everyday lives, particularly their domestic and professional
45 roles. The histories Walbert writes are not narratives of either commonality or
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 individualism, sameness or difference. While their conflicts with one another serve to
10 highlight the limiting and problematic effects of the mother-daughter trope in feminist
11 history, it is also the novel's genealogies that allow us recognise the commonalities
12 between women across the centuries. In doing so, *A Short History of Women* follows
13 feminism's self-reflexive turn by seeking 'to map out and assess which different pieces
14 in the jigsaw of feminism get picked up and why; [...] who is selecting the fragments,
15 and whose particular interests their delivery serves' (Segal, 2001: 57). On a
16 metafictional level, then, the novel reflects on the effects the matrophor has had on the
17 politics of feminist storytelling at the same time as it functions as a historiographic
18 comment on the narrative methods feminist history has employed. Walbert neither
19 naively adopts the notion of feminist generations, nor does she dismiss it as a futile
20 means of narrativising and making sense of feminist histories. Instead, we are prompted
21 to 'try to think through its signification rather than abandoning it at the outset' (Henry,
22 2004: 11).
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41

42 Like so many examples of women's historical fiction in the twentieth and twenty-first
43 centuries, *A Short History of Women* is as much about 'moving forward' (Heilmann and
44 Llewellyn, 2007: 11) as it is about looking back, not least because it participates in the
45 feminist project of (re)writing history at the same as reflecting on the processes and
46 methods which are involved in such political acts. Feminist genealogies are both fruitful
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9 and fraught, restrictive and liberating, but they are inescapable. Evelyn discovers this in
10 the moving final lines of the novel, on her own deathbed, in her memories of her
11 mother, the starving, hospitalised suffragette whom for her entire life she tried so hard
12 to reject: 'I climb into bed with her, into that place where she is and if I get caught, if I
13 am found here, I am sorry, I will tell them: There is nowhere else to be' (Walbert, 2009:
14 237). Evelyn's connection to her biological mother, to her matrilineal history, ultimately
15 is as inescapable as the figurative genealogies of feminist historiography. This
16 recognition is laden with potential rather than complacency or defeat. Paradoxically,
17 Walbert demonstrates that we can appropriate generational narratives in order to
18 critically think across feminist genealogies and beyond feminism's family drama, and
19 while maintaining sight, too, of the root causes of gender inequality, rather than seeking
20 an enemy within.
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37

Notes

38
39
40 i This choice of imagery – of a volcano, which can erupt repeatedly, and of lava,
41 which spreads at a rapid pace after an eruption – is particularly suitable considering the
42 multiple generations of women involved in this first wave of feminism between the
43 mid-nineteenth century and the 1910s. New Woman writers such as Sarah Grand did
44 employ wave metaphors, but not to the same effect as feminists of the 1960s and 70s.
45
46
47
48
49

50 ii Dora Maar (1907–1997), a Croatian-born photographer, was Picasso's muse for
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10 several years in the 1930s and 1940s. Maar suffered from mental health problems
11 throughout her relationship with the famous painter, partly because of his treatment of
12 her and partly because she discovered she was sterile (prompting Picasso's portrayal of
13 her as 'Weeping Woman' in 1937). See: Mary Ann Caws, *Dora Maar with and without*
14 *Picasso: A Biography* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000); Mary Ann Caws, *Picasso's*
15 *Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar* (London: Little, Brown Book Group,
16 2000); and James Lord, *Picasso and Dora: A Memoir* (London: Farrar, Straus and
17 Giroux, 2003).

18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27 iii Such pieces are numerous, and examples include: Roxanne Harde and Erin
28 Harde, 'Voices and Visions: A Mother and Daughter Discuss Coming to Feminism and
29 Being Feminist', *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*, ed. by
30 Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003),
31 pp.116–137; and Anne Firor Scott et al., 'Women's History in the New Millennium: A
32 Conversation across Three 'Generations'', *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations: Life*
33 *Stories from the Academy*, ed. by Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A. Erickson and Jennifer L.
34 Pierce (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp.87–108.

35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45 iv See: Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (London: Back
46 Bay Books, 1993); Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It*
47 *Will Change the 21st Century* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993); Natasha Walter, *The*
48 *New Feminism* (London: Virago, 1998); Rene Denfeld, *The New Victorians: A Young*
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

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).

viii 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.

References

Caws, Mary Ann (2000) *Dora Maar with and without Picasso: A Biography*. London: Thames and Hudson.

---, (2000) *Picasso's Weeping Woman: The Life and Art of Dora Maar*. London:

-
- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10 Little Brown Book Group.
11
12 Caminero-Santangelo, Marta (1998) *The Madwoman Can't Speak: Or Why Insanity Is*
13
14 *Not Subversive*. London: Cornell University Press.
15
16 Cosslett, Tess (1996) 'Feminism, Matrilinealism and the 'House of Women' in
17
18 Contemporary Women's Fiction'. *Journal of Gender Studies* 5(1): 7–17.
19
20 Denfeld, Rene (1995) *The New Victorians: A Young Woman's Challenge to the Old*
21
22 *Feminist Order*. New York: Warner Books.
23
24 Detloff, Madelyn (1997) 'Mean Spirits: The Politics of Contempt Between Feminist
25
26 Generations'. *Hypatia*, 12(3): 76–98.
27
28 Faludi, Susan (1992) *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. London: Chatto
29
30 and Windus.
31
32
33
34 Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New
35
36 York: Bantam Books, 1970.
37
38 Fraiman, Susan (1999) 'Feminism Today: Mothers, Daughters, Emerging Sisters'.
39
40 *American Literary History*, 11(3): 525–44.
41
42
43 Friedman, Susan Stanford (1995) 'Making History: Reflections on Feminism, Narrative,
44
45 and Desire'. In: Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (eds.) *Feminism Beside Itself*.
46
47 London: Routledge, pp. 11–54.
48
49
50 Fuss, Diana (1995) *Identification Papers*. New York: Routledge.
51
52 Genz, Stéphanie (2010) 'Singled Out: Postfeminism's 'New Woman' and the Dilemma
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

-
- of Having It All'. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 43(1): 97–119.
- Gillis, Stacy and Rebecca Munford (2004) 'Genealogies and Generations: The Politics and Praxis of Third Wave Feminism'. *Women's History Review*, 13(2): 165–82.
- Harde, Roxanne and Erin Harde (2003) 'Voices and Visions: A Mother and Daughter Discuss Coming to Feminism and Being Feminist'. In: Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier (eds) *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, pp. 116–137.
- Heilmann, Ann and Mark Llewellyn (2007) 'Introduction'. In: Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (eds) *Metafiction and Metahistory in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–12.
- Hemmings, Clare (2011) *Why Stories Matter: The Politics Grammar of Feminist Theory*. London: Duke University Press.
- Henry, Astrid (2004) *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Hutcheon, Linda (1988) *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London: Routledge.
- King, Jeannette (2005) *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Women's Writing*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- LeGates, Madeleine (2001) *In Their Time: A History of Feminism in Western Society*. London: Routledge.

-
- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10 Logan, Anne (2008) *Feminism and Criminal Justice: A Historical Perspective*.
11 Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
12
13
14 Lord, James (2003) *Picasso and Dora: A Memoir*. London: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
15
16 Mitchell, Juliet (1966) 'Women: The Longest Revolution'. *New Left Review* 40: 11–37.
17
18 Muller, Nadine (2009/10), 'Not My Mother's Daughter: Matrilinealism, Third-Wave
19
20 Feminism & Neo-Victorian Fiction', *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 2(2): 109-136.
21
22 Neuborne, Ellen (1995) 'Imagine My Surprise'. In: Barbara Findlen (ed) *Listen Up:*
23
24 *Voices of the Next Feminist Generation*. London: Seal Press, pp. 29–35.
25
26
27 Quinn, Rebecca Dakin (1997) 'An Open Letter to Institutional Mothers'. In: Devoney
28
29 Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (eds) *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*.
30
31 Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 174–182.
32
33
34 Rich, Adrienne (1976) *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.
35
36 New York: W.W. Norton and Company.
37
38
39 Roiphe, Katie (1993) *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism*. London: Back Bay
40
41 Books.
42
43 Scott, Anne Firor et al. (2007) 'Women's History in the New Millennium: A
44
45 Conversation across Three 'Generations''. In: Hokulani K. Aikau, Karla A.
46
47 Erickson and Jennifer L. Pierce (eds) *Feminist Waves, Feminist Generations:*
48
49 *Life Stories from the Academy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.
50
51 87–108.
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

- 1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60
-
- Segal, Lynne (2001) 'Only Contradictions on Offer: Anglophone Feminism at the Millennium'. In: Marianne DeKoven (ed) *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, pp. 37–59.
- Showalter, Elaine [1985] (2007) *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980*. London: Virago.
- , (1997) *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Culture*. London: Picador.
- Siegel, Deborah L. (1997) 'The Legacy of the Personal: Generating Theory in Feminism's Third Wave'. *Hypatia*, 12(3): 46–75.
- Smith, Angela K. (2005) *Suffrage Discourse in Britain during the First World War*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Steenbergen, Candis (2006) 'history, postmodern'. In: Leslie L. Heywood (ed) *The Women's Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism*. London: Greenwood Press, 2006, pp. 177–8.
- Thornham, Sue (2001) 'Second Wave Feminism'. In: Sarah Gamble (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, pp. 29–42.
- Walbert, Kate (2009) *A Short History of Women*. London: Scribner.
- Walter, Natasha (1998) *The New Feminism*. London: Virago.
- , (2010) *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*. London: Virago.

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
11
12
13
14
15
16
17
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25
26
27
28
29
30
31
32
33
34
35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46
47
48
49
50
51
52
53
54
55
56
57
58
59
60

Whelehan, Imelda (2005) *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Wolf, Naomi (1993) *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power and How It Will Change the 21st Century*. London: Chatto and Windus.

For Peer Review