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## Autobiographical Voices

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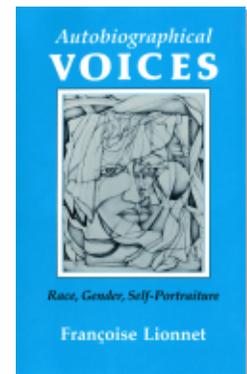
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## *Preface*

We women are so diverse and live in such varied cultural, racial, and economic circumstances that we cannot possibly pretend to speak in a single voice. It is by listening to a plurality of voices from various corners of the planet and across centuries that we will strengthen our ability to resist demeaning power structures without risk of being recuperated by current or trendy professionalism within our academic disciplines. Women's voices do not and will never constitute a "minority discourse." Our voices have existed in a state of greater or lesser tension with other points of view in all historical eras and geographical areas. Always present everywhere but rarely heard, let alone recorded, women's voices have not been a dominant mode of expression or a legitimate and acceptable alternative to such dominant modes. The very inaudibility of these dissenting voices within accepted patterns of traditional and/or oppositional practices is a clear indictment of the processes through which such imperialist patterns have been constituted. Our voices have always been there, but it is only recently that academic and political institutions have begun to take them seriously. This book was written from the deep conviction that it is the foregrounding of our *differences* as women which can ultimately unite us as a powerful force of resistance against all repressive systems of ideology.

By focusing on the autobiographical fictions of some women writers from different—yet similar—cultural contexts (e.g., Afro-American, Caribbean, and Mauritian), I hope to echo some of the most innovative aspects of this global literature, especially its revision of

canonical texts such as Augustine's and Nietzsche's and its growing interest in highlighting *alternative* patterns of resistance to cultural and political hegemony. These women writers articulate a vision of the future founded on individual and collective solidarities, respectful of cultural specificities, and opposed to all rigid, essentializing approaches to questions of race, class, or gender. Because of the subtle and nonexclusionary nature of their project, the writers have often been browbeaten by male writers and critics, who have accused them of not being sufficiently "political." I hope my analyses will help to counter such simplistic approaches to their works and will encourage critics to look at that body of writing in a different light. It is indeed deeply disturbing to me, as a woman and as a critic, that writers as intelligent and talented as Zora Neale Hurston, Maryse Condé, and Marie-Thérèse Humbert have been viewed by compatriots—such as Richard Wright, Oruno Lara, and Edouard Maunick—as unenlightened, apolitical, and at best slightly embarrassing sisters because the confessional nature of some of their narratives does not offer ready-made solutions to the problems of racism in their respective countries. Perhaps as a result of such thorough misunderstanding and its disheartening consequences for the creative person, Maryse Condé and Marie-Thérèse Humbert stopped writing about their own islands: Condé's recent successes have been historical novels set in a very distant past, and Humbert's second book was about an imaginary island in the Atlantic. Hurston's fate is well known and need not be rehearsed here: such forms of self-censorship bespeak the coercive nature of narrowly construed "political" interpretations of the works I discuss. By focusing on the language and structure of these works—narrative strategies, rhetorical patterns, and discursive configurations—I hope to elucidate the subtlety of the writers' vision and to stress their unflinching commitment to a process of emancipation that can redefine the nature and boundaries of the political.

Many friends have been there for me from the inception of this project. Ross Chambers believed in it from the start, and my intellectual debt to him is vast and long-standing. His approach to narrative and his seminars at the University of Michigan provided the methodological tools that became indispensable to my analyses. John McCumber, with his philosophical acumen and good linguistic

sense, has always been my best interlocutor. Eva Boesenberg, Sarah Kofman, Adlai Murdoch, Jonathan Ngaté, Ronnie Scharfman, and Louise Yelin read and discussed different chapters of the manuscript.

Through their research and teaching, the following people have contributed much to my insights: Michel Beaujour's rhetoric of the self-portrait showed me new ways of dealing with autobiographies; Lemuel Johnson introduced me to the concept of ethnocentrism, and his discussions broadened my approach; Margot Norris's work on mimesis and dissimulation helped me to look at linear narratives in a new light; my reading of Augustine was triggered by Susan Sontag's course at the New School for Social Research. The seminars Gerald Graff, Lynn Hunt, and Barbara Johnson gave at the 1986 International Summer Institute for Semiotics and Structural Studies at Northwestern University provided a very useful context for reflection.

During the 1987–1988 academic year, a postdoctoral fellowship at the Society for the Humanities, Cornell University, enabled me to complete work on the manuscript. The society provided a stimulating intellectual environment in which to refine and sharpen some of my ideas. I especially thank Stephen Clingman, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Christopher Waterman for provocative remarks, encouragement, and good times. I also thank Dominick LaCapra, the acting director, and his staff and the other fellows for making this a very fulfilling year. The insight, energy, and interest of the students who discussed the major ideas of this book in my seminar at the society made my teaching there a most gratifying experience. This fellowship year was also made possible by supplements and time off granted by the College of Arts and Sciences, Northwestern University, for which I express my appreciation.

The anonymous readers for Cornell University Press made invaluable comments. Their interest as well as their questions and criticisms encouraged me to better articulate some crucial points. In the final stages of writing, Celeste Schenck's intelligent, thorough, and extremely perceptive advice helped me through some last hurdles. I am also grateful for the careful editing of Judith Bailey and the work of Bernhard Kendler and Kay Scheuer.

Over the years, I have shared ideas and vented discontents with many feminist friends in five different countries: I treasure those

exchanges and the discoveries to which they led. Among such friends, my mother has a special place, as do Andrée Fredette and Jocelyne Newberry. Finally, my most profound debt is to those who share my daily life: living, reading, and writing are possible because *you* are always there.

A shorter version of Chapter 6 first appeared as "Métissage, Emancipation, and Female Textuality in Two Francophone Writers," in *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Cornell University Press, 1988), copyright © by Cornell University. A somewhat different version of Chapter 7 was first published as "Anamnesis and Utopia: Nietzschean Self-Portraiture in Marie-Thérèse Humbert's *A l'autre bout de moi*," in the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 15:1 (1988). Both are reprinted here by permission.

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