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Autobiographical Voices

Françoise Lionnet

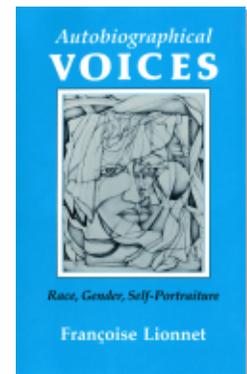
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Foreword

As the editors of *Reading Women Writing*, we are committed to furthering international feminist debate. To that end, we seek books that rigorously explore how differences of class, race, ethnic background, nationality, religious preference, and sexual choice inform women's writing. Books sensitive to the ways women's writings are classified, evaluated, read, and taught are central to the series. Dedicated primarily although not exclusively to the examination of literature written by women, *Reading Women Writing* highlights differing, even contradictory, theoretical positions on texts read in cultural context. Of particular interest to us are feminist criticism of non-canonical texts (including film, popular culture, and new and as yet unnamed genres); confrontations of first-world theory with beyond-the-first-world texts; and books on colonial and postcolonial writing that generate their own theoretical positions. Among volumes in prospect for the series are a book on women's prison narratives in international context, a study of incest and the writing daughter in Jean Rhys and H.D., and a reading of popular film, sexual difference, and spectatorship in an emphatically social context.

Françoise Lionnet's *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*, the inaugural volume of *Reading Women Writing*, is comparative, theoretical, and political; it is also formally innovative. Lionnet groups Afro-American, Caribbean, and Indian Ocean texts without effacing their differences; by means of comparative analysis, she expands the theoretical boundaries of women's autobiography. In her nonlinear, inter-referential readings of these texts, she avoids

hypostasizing either “black women’s autobiography” or “Indian Ocean women’s autobiography.” Then, too, by invoking Augustine and Nietzsche, not as models of masculine autobiography to which she will set contrasting female examples, but *for* the feminine in them, she reads through and against these male texts: both to show women writers’ indebtedness to an autobiographical tradition and to imagine that tradition retroactively in the light of women’s texts.

The concept of *métissage*, exuberantly elaborated in Lionnet’s text, propels *Autobiographical Voices* at every level. The inseparable aesthetic and political functions of *métissage* link the five women authors discussed—Hurston, Angelou, Cardinal, Condé, Humbert—and join the whole comparative reading to the political stance Lionnet takes, appropriating the Darwinian notion of strength in diversity. *Métissage* is also the basis for Lionnet’s positioning of herself as a reader/subject; she is herself a *métisse*, born in Mauritius, educated in France, now living and teaching in America. Finally, *métissage* functions as a strategy for approaching her book: a reader may pursue any number of paths through the text, considering out of sequence, for example, the chapters on Augustine, Angelou and Humbert. The reader thereby participates in the book’s production by making a commitment—political, as Lionnet would have it—to bricolage, reading, as it were, as a *métisseuse*. The very form of *Autobiographical Voices* is necessarily hybrid. It dares scholarly convention to be adequate to *its* diversity of critical moves. With *Autobiographical Voices* by Françoise Lionnet, *Reading Women Writing* proudly commences publication.

S. B.

C. S.