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Lesbian mothering and the family in France

Gill Rye (Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, University of London)

Family demographics in France are currently undergoing a process of change, as they are in other Western societies. The conventional nuclear family is in decline, and different arrangements are taking its place: single-parent families, post-divorce blended families, gay and lesbian family groupings. The classic nuclear family, as we know it, is historically (and culturally) specific, of course, yet it remains the norm and ideal by which other models of the family are judged – by politicians, religious leaders, psychologists, educationalists, and in the popular and conservative media. In this optic, same-sex parenting – or *homoparentalité*, to employ the term increasingly in use in France – is perhaps the most severely judged, but in her study of the breakdown of the contemporary family, *La Famille en désordre* (2002), Élisabeth Roudinesco suggests that same-sex families are precisely those that may offer us new parental paradigms for the family of the future. However, Roudinesco, among others, also points to the dynamics between sameness and difference, normality and transgression, involved in *homoparentalité*. In wanting to have children, to what extent do gay men and lesbians (wish to) integrate themselves into society as 'normal'? Or are they, rather, engaged in asserting their difference from the norm? Are same-sex families simply part of a general evolution in the family or are they

forging new social formations? Questions such as these take on particular resonance and urgency in the French context, given France's hetero-normative family laws and the French Republican eschewal of identity politics.

My paper engages with this debate, which is ongoing in France (particularly since the inception of the PaCS law which recognises same-sex couples but does not make provision for those with children). It draws on the burgeoning body of work on *homoparentalité* that has emerged over the last few years in France, especially in sociology and anthropology, on similar work in North America, and on a group of recent literary narratives of lesbian mothering.

[ref handout – for details of 4 primary texts].

These four texts are examples of an emerging corpus of literature, fictional and autobiographical, portraying *homoparentalité*. They are not in any way great works of literature, but they are worth studying as part of an emerging socio-cultural trend, and they enable a preliminary evaluation of the extent to which contemporary representations of lesbian mothers posit new parental paradigms. My focus on lesbian parents is not to negate the similar – or arguably even greater – challenges to the nuclear norm raised by gay men's parenting (gay men are subjected to even more vehement criticism as parents than gay women). Rather, in the context of my own broader interrogation of mothering and of what it means today, it is to explore some of the particular issues that are currently being raised by narratives of lesbian mothering in contemporary French literature. This paper concentrates on two key points relative to lesbian parental paradigms: (i) the question of the father and (ii) the role of the 'second' or co-mother.

The texts are all quite different from each other in their form and style, but they address a number of similar issues. In all cases, they offer first-person narratives of chosen lesbian parenthood. (There are as yet few recent texts to present the other

side – the son’s or daughter’s view of lesbian parents. It is symptomatic of the political controversy surrounding *homoparentalité* in France, as well as of its increasing visibility since the mid-1990s, that they all foreground the complex process of *becoming* a lesbian mother rather than its ongoing lived experience, focusing, in almost ethnographic detail, on the issues that their lesbian protagonists have to grapple with as they plan for parenthood and become mothers.

The narrators of the four texts claim both similarity to and difference from ‘ordinary’ parents (exactly what ‘ordinary’ refers to other than heterosexual parenting is unclear, although the plurality of both homo- and heterosexual families (such as we’ll undoubtedly see in the other papers) *is* acknowledged in these texts). In general terms, the narrators claim that their desire for a child is the same as that of most other mothers, an absolutely ordinary desire, not an extraordinary or monstrous one. This does not mean they are trying to negate their differences. Rather, they are claiming what some critics have termed the *banalisation of homoparentalité* – namely, that lesbian families, in all their differences, be integrated into the general concept of the family in France, and for their capabilities as parents to be considered on equal terms. For example, Cinq-Fraix’s narrator Cécile, celebrating the couple’s success in the competition for a crèche place for their child, crows: ‘Ce n’est rien, je sais, mais ce que ça peut faire plaisir d’entrer dans la ronde’ (232).

Blanc’s *récit*, like the others, protests normality, on the one hand – ‘On se sent tellement des parents comme les autres qu’on en oublie parfois qu’on est différentes’ (16) – while, on the other, it also asserts her family’s difference: ‘Voici donc l’histoire d’une famille, la nôtre. Elle ressemble à toutes les familles, à ce détail près qu’elle compte deux mères et pas de père’ (5). In all the texts, in fact, the claim for normality, ordinariness, tinged as it is with the recognition that lesbian mothers *are* different (and

this is often a matter of visibility), betrays a concern that gay and lesbian parents have to do better than others in order for their parenting capabilities to be recognised.

Rather than a binary either/or relationship to conformity and difference, then, the narrators' declared perceptions of lesbian mothering in these texts demonstrate a kind of shuttle effect: their professions of similarity also affirming their difference, and their declarations of difference betraying a wish or pressure to conform. In order to explore this dynamic further, I now turn to two key issues: the question of the father and the role of the co-mother.

When lesbian women embark on their *projets d'enfant*, unlike the majority of heterosexuals, they have to decide first which method they will use to achieve their aim and what form their family will take: adoption, insemination either by known or anonymous donor, parenting as a couple or as a single person, a co-parenting arrangement with one or more men. This decision-making process involves the crucial question of the father and to what degree lesbian women wish a man to be involved in the parenting of their child. Cinq-Fraix's *Family Pride* portrays a four-way co-parenting arrangement with a gay male couple in which the father of the child and his partner play an active part. However, in the other three texts, the women decide they want to parent only as a couple: in Altman's text by adoption; in Girard's novel, conception with the help of a male friend; in Blanc's text, artificial insemination by anonymous donor. Blanc's couple value, above all, the donor anonymity that this technology offers. It allows them to situate themselves – in the same way as heterosexual couples benefiting from assisted contraception – as 'les seuls parents de nos filles' (49), the donor being just that, 'un donneur, pas un père' (49). The couple even takes the decision not to have the same donor for both their daughters, in order, Myriam declares, to avoid fantasy constructions of a "père" mythique' (41), and to establish love rather than biology as the foundation of their family unit. However, if

on the face of it, the question of a father seems to be fairly easily resolved in each of these texts, the power of the socio-legal script that children need a mother and a father is not negated. In all the accounts, the pros and cons are rehearsed, and the women's decision to become mothers is far from guilt-free.

The absence of a father from a family unit is not new or revolutionary in itself, of course, although fatherless families still tend to be designated as dysfunctional in normative discourses of the family. Women who *choose* to parent without men are commonly positioned as a threat to the good functioning of the social order. Lesbian mothering, in particular, effects a split in the different functions that have historically clustered around the father. Thus biological parenting is partly (though not totally as in adoption) separated from what ethnologist Anne Cadoret (2002: 35) calls the 'fonction de parentalité – soigner, éduquer, aimer l'enfant', or what Martine Gross, one of the principal theorists of *homoparentalité*, terms the 'parent social: personne qui se conduit comme un parent mais qui n'en a pas le statut légal' (2005 (Que sais-je): 19). Above all, lesbian parenting confronts society at large with the fact that sexuality is no longer the only basis for the foundation of a family, and frequently, the social father is dispensed with completely. The opportunities offered by reproductive technologies – these 'new routes to *becoming* a parent' (O'Neill 2000: 33; my stress) – may be changing the ways in which *being* a parent is lived out. Anthropologists and sociologists in France, as elsewhere, are exploring the new kinship structures that are being produced, and research showing that children in gay and lesbian families are as well adjusted as those in heterosexual families is widely quoted in their support. However, as Gross points out (2005: 103), clinical psychoanalysts in France are only just beginning to engage with the issue, and French law does not yet recognise the different notions of *filiation* that are being created by lesbian and gay families. Thus

the issue of the father in a broader frame, poses more questions than it answers. The situation of the 'second' or co-mother is perhaps even more complex.

The non-biological (or, as in Altman's case, the non-adoptive) mother in lesbian families (and in many co-parenting arrangements) foregrounds two sets of issues: the place or role of this 'second' or co-mother in the family unit and her legal position vis-à-vis her children. Her situation is quite different from those in existing family forms. For example, she is not in a similar position to a step-parent in post-divorce or post-bereavement *familles recomposées*, since she is often involved in the planning of the family from the outset. Nor is she like an adoptive mother whose role as social mother is generally modelled on that of a biological mother in a conventional nuclear family. Lesbian co-mothers have few *points de repère* to draw on and, largely, have to invent their own role and identity. Conventional ideas or fantasies of what motherhood is do not really apply. Indeed, even in the North American context, in which lesbian families have a longer history than in France, there is little research in existence on the role and identity of the co-mother (Comeau 1999: 45).

In Girard's novel, the character Fanny, who chooses not to be the pregnant mother, nonetheless reflects a great deal on her identity as *co-mère*: 'Le problème est que je suis la seule à avoir l'honneur de porter ce si joli titre. Cécile elle est mère. Point.' (118) The relevant issues are worked through in scenes where the women announce the impending birth to their respective parents, who also function as figures of the opinion of society at large. Cécile's parents are very open-minded about their daughter's sexuality but, when it comes to the prospective baby, they find it difficult to think outside the heterosexual model and, in particular, have trouble with the concept of there being no father. For them, the *géniteur* or donor *is* the father, and if, as Cécile explains, he will not take part in parenting the child, then: 'Alors c'est Fanny qui fera office de papa, c'est ça?' (147). For them, there has to be a father.

Fanny's own parents are more concerned about their own status as grandparents than anything else. Fanny's mother fears that she will be less of grandmother than Cécile's mother, who is 'la mère de la vraie mère' (184), and her father is disappointed that Fanny is not the birth mother and that the child will not carry his name: 'Je n'ai pas fait une fille pour qu'elle devienne un faux père' (185).

From all sides, then, Fanny is confronted with her lack of status: 'Superbement ignorée. C'est tout. Là où ni la biologie, ni la loi ne donne de droits, les autres ne t'en donnent pas plus. Je n'existe pas par rapport à cet enfant, tu viens d'en avoir la preuve' (151). If Cécile's liberal parents have trouble placing Fanny as another mother to their future grandchild, Fanny's outburst reveals her own identity crisis: she has 'no references or mirrors to view [her] reflection' (Dundas 1999: 37); and the narrator of Cinq-Fraix's novel expresses a similar perspective (see quote 10).

As far as the legal status of the co-mother is concerned, Gross is quite clear: 'Quelle que soit la structure, un parent social n'a en France, aucun droit: il n'existe pas aux yeux de la loi' (2005 (Que sais-je?): 20); she is a 'non-parent' (Blanc: 28). This situation carries serious consequences for lesbian co-mothers. In France, *l'autorité parentale* is still normally conferred only on the father and the mother of a child and not on two parents of the same sex. This not only creates practical problems in dealings with schools or hospitals, but it also means that a co-mother has no custody rights to her children if her partner dies or if the couple split up. Both Girard's and Cinq-Fraix's novels portray break-ups of lesbian couples in co-parenting arrangements. Cinq-Fraix's scenario results in a civilised arrangement whereby the co-mother (the narrator) continues to have access to her daughter, and indeed, the original four-way parenting structure continues to have presence and significance in the child's life, despite the break-up. In contrast, Girard's novel portrays what can happen when things don't go so well. In a sub-plot to the story of Cécile and Fanny, a

lesbian birth mother uses her two children as emotional blackmail following the break-up with her long-standing partner to whom she refuses access. French law is, however, beginning to evolve via a series of recent test cases, which have attempted to achieve shared parental authority for lesbian couples, but with every two steps forward taken, there seems also to be one, frustrating, step back.

The four texts, between them, explore some of the personal, social and legal implications for the lesbian co-mother in France. If she finds it hard even to figure her own role and identity in the family, this is partly because there are no preceding models. Moreover, there are as yet not even any conventions of language and terminology for her to describe who she is.

The four texts evidently reflect the conformity/difference dynamic I referred to at the start of my paper, but although all the lesbian couples claim to be ‘dans la norme’ in their qualities as parents, their ‘situation inédite’ (Girard 2005: 217) as parents is never seriously in question. However, to what extent do they represent the transgressive force that Roudinesco in her study of the contemporary family claims *homoparentalité* to be? Here, Roudinesco (221-3) is referring to the fundamental challenge to the question of origins and to sexual difference that renders gay and lesbian families not simply a curiosity but also a so-called ‘threat’ to the social order, since the (patriarchal) social order is based on sexual difference and heterosexuality. In co-parenting arrangements (as in Cinq-Fraix’s novel), the mother-father dyad remains in tact, albeit multiplied – a child can have four parents, four sets of grandparents, etc. – and calling into question the conventional equation of parenthood with conjugality (Gross 2005b: 44). Other kinds of lesbian family arrangements, however, destabilise sexual difference itself, since they tend to dispense with the social father completely. Yet, as in the other three texts, such families do not eliminate

sexual difference entirely, neither as far as conception is concerned, nor in a lack of male referents. Rather, we can identify a revaluation and a renewal of the extended family, which is in counterpoint to its general fragmentation during the 20th-century. In the absence of fathers, other family members provide the couples' children with a masculine presence, and, moreover, the texts suggest that the whole concept of the family is enlarged and enriched by gay culture itself, by means of the inclusion of gay friends and networks.

The extended family notwithstanding, lesbian families do undoubtedly contribute to the decline in paternal authority, identified by Roudinesco among others, and which the other papers in this session perhaps reflect. Myriam's desire to eradicate even a 'père mythique' (41) is perhaps the most transgressive move of all, since it raises questions about what happens to the psychical paternal function (as opposed to either the biological or the social fathering role) in families with two mothers and no father. For children of same-sex parents, the primal scene of psychoanalysis must take on a quite different hue. Moreover, although French psychoanalysts have accepted for some time that figures of either sex can fulfil the paternal function of separator, in the texts discussed here, which focus on the process of becoming a mother rather than on its lived reality, it is not certain that this would be the co-mother, or indeed either mother: Girard's Fanny has yet to invent her role, and Blanc's and Altman's couples, each of whom are both mothers and co-mothers, seem to share primary parenting equally as well as other traditionally gendered roles. In their case, if the role of separator survives within the family unit, it would seem to shift back and forth between them.

The four narratives suggest that the greatest challenge to conventional concepts of the mother and of mothering lies principally in the figure of the co-mother. In Girard's novel, the way Fanny will live out her role as co-mother is left

open-ended and thus open to speculation, and importantly that speculation is written into the narrative itself. Cécile protests to her parents that ‘Non Fanny n’est pas un papa, ça se voit non?’ (148), but a counsellor from a gay and lesbian parents’ group reminds her that ‘ça reste à voir. Pourquoi le rôle du père devrait-il être tenu par un homme?’ (158). Rather than signifying a return to the father and conformity, however, this latter point is potentially more thought-provoking than it might at first seem. Girard’s novel, indeed, shows how Cécile’s parents normalise the prospect of a lesbian family by conceptualising Fanny as the father. But here, it is suggested, we should reflect on the innovative implications of women appropriating – and, importantly, necessarily modifying – the paternal role and function in the name of the mother or co-mother. France is not there yet, however. A French newspaper recently reported that a lesbian couple’s application for paternity leave for the co-mother was refused on the grounds that ‘la loi le réserve aux pères’ (*Ouest France*).

As cultural narratives of lesbian mothering, the four texts are important in themselves. In their reflection of – and engagement with – contemporary debates on *homoparentalité*, they, in turn, also engage the reader in those debates. Indeed, they all have an activist impetus: Altman’s and Blanc’s texts each carry a ‘militant’ afterword, but the novels, by Girard and Cinq-Fraix, also contribute to this political *prise de la parole*. They contribute to what is actually lobbying work, documenting, charting and representing the development of *homoparentalité* in contemporary France, in an effort, it seems, to change attitudes (and ultimately laws) so that these new parental paradigms can be accommodated in the French Republic. In this, they at once acknowledge the difference of same-sex parents and appeal for their ordinariness, as, simply, women – and men (in the case of Cinq-Fraix’s novel) – who want to have children and establish a family. And, as if in positive response to Roudinesco’s suggestion that these families might offer models for the mainstream

future, Girard's novel ends, politically, with one of Cécile's and Fanny's *heterosexual* women friends embarking on her own co-parenting arrangement with a gay man.