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Moving beyond Myths of Motherhood in Life Writing

Paradoxical Affects and Narrative Form in Heti's *Motherhood* & Cusk's *A Life's Work* within a Culture of Self-Help

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Année académique 2025-2026
Master en langues et lettres modernes, orientation germanique
Finalité approfondie

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Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Professor De Bruyn, for his guidance, insightful feedback, and impressive expertise throughout the development of this thesis.

I am deeply thankful to my friends, in particular Marie, Clémence, and Iris, for their constant encouragement and for always being there to listen and motivate me at every stage of this process. I am also grateful to Elise, with whom I shared the challenges of this work.

My appreciation goes to my father, for his support and the care he showed.

I would like to thank my grandparents for their continuous encouragement, their genuine interest in my work, and their careful and attentive reading of my chapters.

I am particularly grateful to Nicolas, for his constant presence, support, love, encouragement, and care throughout this journey.

Above all, I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my mother, for her unconditional support, her presence, her encouragement, and her reading of my work. I am especially thankful for her attentive listening, for her interest in my reflections, and for always believing in me.

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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the rise of gender equality and technological developments has contributed to a diversification and greater acceptance of reproduction choices and family configurations (Delanerolle, 4-5; Kurt, 4). However, this growing heterogeneity coexists with the persistence of conservative norms, notably regarding motherhood (Henriksson et al., 3). as Henriksson et al. note, "Motherhood is a phenomenon that concerns women all around the world. This is not to say that all women mother, or are mothers, but it is to say that all women are affected in one way or another by motherhood, by its absence or presence" (4). This quote illustrates the pervasive reach of motherhood as both a social institution and a cultural expectation. Indeed, motherhood has been and continues to be framed as a universally natural and fulfilling experience for women (Lewis, 32;35). This ideal is sustained not only through social norms but also through a culture of self-help and therapeutic discourse, forming part of what has been described as a "happiness turn" (Lewis, 32; Ahmed, 3). Within this cultural framework where women are supposed to reach ultimate happiness with motherhood, affects perceived as petty – such as frustration – or shocking – such as emotional detachment and ambivalence –, are frequently interpreted as personal failures rather than responses to structural pressures (Green, 2004, 128; Lewis, 37).

Against this backdrop, there has been a rise of narratives by mothers who expose the often marginalized and unpleasant sides of maternity, as well as narratives by women who question or resist the imposed norm to become a mother (Thomas, 2018, 72). It is those narratives, "and the maternal experiences they express, whether the narratives are fictional(ized) or 'documentary', that stir up debate, call attention to controversial issues and scrutinize conditions that clash with ideals and established perceptions" (Henriksson et al., 5). Literature thereby emerges as a powerful tool for women and mothers to shift from a passive figure imprisoned by patriarchal views on motherhood to an active figure fighting against subjugation to the discourse of idealized motherhood (Choi et al., 169). This literary development must also be understood as embedded in broader socio-political transformations, including changing reproductive rights and the growth of neoliberal capitalism – issues that will be explored in Chapter One.

This surge in maternal narratives coincides with the rise in life writing, which has taken a prominent place in contemporary English literature (Ioanes, 97). Contemporary women writers engage with feminist concerns through genres such as memoir and autofiction, where personal experience becomes a lens for interrogating cultural norms (Ioanes, 97). Motherhood memoirs, particularly, have started to take a prominent place in literature in the first decade of the twenty-first century, with authors such as Naomi Wolf, Lauren Slater, Lisa Belkin, Faulkner Fox and Susan Cheever (Kawash, 985; Brown, 201). These works, whether non-fictional or auto-fictional, reflect broader cultural shifts, including the refusal of the so-

called “biological destiny of women” (Johnson et al., 1161), the growing visibility of maternal struggles “against personal and political oppression” (Quiney, 21), and feminist critiques of the ideals of myths of motherhood – such as the ‘happy’ and 'self-sacrificing' mother (Lewis, 35; Hallstein, 2006, 97).

Within this context, this thesis examines how paradoxical affects and narrative form challenge myths of motherhood in Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* (2018) and Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* (2001). Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s figure of the “feminist killjoy” and Sianne Ngai’s concept of “ugly feelings”, it understands marginalized and ambivalent affects as forms of both testimony to and resistance against the cultural demands for maternal happiness. Besides the level of content, this defiance operates also through narrative form. Both Heti's and Cusk’s analyzed books are characterized by fragmentation and repetition, refusing the dominant masculine linear experience of time (Thomas, 2019, 27) and disrupting the resolution typically associated with self-help and therapeutic discourses (Gladding et al., 1). This thesis will thus see how these books engage with what Beth Blum terms “self-help hermeneutics”. While motherhood has been widely studied both as a social construct – by feminist critics such as Adrienne Rich and Andrea O’Reilly – and as a recurring literary theme (Fahlgren et al., 136), there has been less attention to how affect and narrative form interact to destabilize motherhood myths, particularly in relation to self-help and therapeutic discourses within the context of the “happiness turn”. This thesis therefore argues that affect and form are intertwined in *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work* to challenge dominant ideals of maternal happiness, and that they share both an engagement with and a resistance to self-help and therapeutic logics.

This paper offers a comparative literary analysis of Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* and Heti’s *Motherhood* and is situated at the intersection of affect studies (e.g. Massumi; Ngai; Ahmed), contemporary literary studies (e.g. Houser), and gender studies, more specifically motherhood studies (e.g. Rich; Ruddick; Hays). This study also draws on scholarships on life writing (e.g. Smith et al.), self-help hermeneutics (e.g. Beth Blum), and therapeutic discourse (e.g. Dapra; Pascuzzi et al.). Chapters One to Three establish the broader cultural context of the study, addressing contemporary debates around reproduction, the foundations and key concepts of motherhood studies, and the rise of life writing alongside self-help and therapeutic frameworks. Chapters Four and Five develop the analytical tools of affect and narrative form. Chapter Six reviews existing scholarship on Heti’s and Cusk’s works in order to identify critical gaps in their critical reception and to position this thesis. Building on this foundation, Chapters Seven and Eight provide close readings of affect and narrative in Heti’s *Motherhood* and Cusk’s *A Life's Work*, respectively. Chapter Nine offers a comparative analysis of both texts in terms of affect and form, and offers an analysis of how they respond to the contemporary discourses and concepts developed in the theoretical chapters.

It is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of this study. Contemporary literature on (non-)motherhood is vast, and this thesis does not aim to be a generalization of

all maternal narratives. Instead, this paper chose to focus on a deliberately limited corpus, one book by each author – a selection that will be explained below in the overview of the corpus. Therefore, it is also important to keep in mind that these two texts are not a reflection of all their books. In addition, *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* present similar views but with a fundamental different perspective, one without children and the other with. This contrast both enriches the comparative analysis and introduces a potential limitation, as the experiences examined are not directly equivalent. Finally, it should be noted that affect is a concept marked by theoretical instability and disagreement amongst scholars; this thesis does not attempt to resolve these debates but works with this instability as part of its framework.

Contesting Maternal Ideals: Sheila Heti & Rachel Cusk

The authors chosen for this analysis are Sheila Heti and Rachel Cusk, both contemporary, English-speaking, and prize-winning writers. Both are celebrated but controversial at the same time, due to the strong criticism of motherhood in their works (Fahlgren et al., 136). Indeed, Cusk's publication of *A Life's Work* sparked intense critical responses, with reviewers judging her against ideals of good motherhood, and Heti was judged as too self-absorbed and cynical (Fahlgren et al., 136; 143; 148). This public criticism will be further developed in Chapter Six, as it demonstrates the social conditions in which (non-)motherhood is experienced.

Sheila Heti is a Canadian writer born in 1976 and living in Toronto. She is the daughter of Jewish-Hungarian immigrants and is herself without children. She is the author of diverse genres: she wrote a play, novels, children's picture books, short stories, essays, and an experimental autobiographical book. She has also contributed to periodicals and is "the founder of the "Trampoline Hall", a lecture series in Toronto (Goodreads, n.d.-b, §9). She was recognized by *The New York Times* as one of "The New Vanguard", a group of fifteen international writers redefining how we read and write fiction in the twenty-first century (Goodreads, §3). She won multiple prices, such as the Women's Prize for Fiction in 2013 for her book *How Should a Person Be?* and the Governor General's Literary Award in Fiction in 2022 for her novel *Pure Color (*Goodreads, n.d.-b, §4). Her work has been translated into twenty-three languages (Goodreads, §3).

Rachel Cusk is a Canadian-British writer born in 1967 in Saskatoon (Canada) to British parents. She lived a few years in the United States before moving to Britain with her parents when she was eight. She was nominated by Granta Magazine as "one of 20 'Best of Young British Novelists'" in 2003 (Goodreads, n.d.-a, §3). She is the winner of several awards, such as the Folio Prize in 2015 for her novel *Outline* and the Goldsmiths prize in 2024 for her novel *Parade* (Goodreads, n.d.-a, §3). She made her debut in 1993 with the bildungsroman *Saving Agnes*, which received the Whitebread First Novel Prize (Thurman, §5). She also wrote three autobiographies – *A Life's Work*, *The Last Supper*, and *Aftermath* – respectively in 2001 about her first maternity experience; in 2009 about a summer trip in Italy with her family to escape

the oppression of domestic life; and in 2012 about her divorce from her second husband. In addition to novels and autobiographies, she has also published a play and short stories. Cusk is also known for her feminist articles, such as “Shakespeare’s Daughters”, “The simmering but stymied rage of stay-at-home mums”, and “I was only being honest”, which address concerns that are also present in her books. Regarding her private life, she has two daughters from her second marriage and now lives in Paris with her third husband.

Overview of the Corpus: *Motherhood* & *A Life’s Work*

This study focuses on two contemporary works that offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on (non-)motherhood: Sheila Heti’s Motherhood (2018) and Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* (2001). The choice of these texts is motivated by their shared engagement with questions surrounding reproductive choice and maternal experience, their controversial critical reception, and their exploration of affect and narrative form. Both texts explore similar concerns, such as the tension between motherhood, female identity, and artistic life, the questioning of female value outside of motherhood, and the normality of their feelings. They also share a resentment toward social expectations, which is entangled with conflicting affects articulated through formal strategies.

Moreover, Heti’s narrator interrogates the question of whether to become a mother, whereas Cusk reflects on her lived experience of early motherhood. These two works offer thus distinct yet complementary perspectives: one situated within motherhood, the other at its threshold. Despite this difference, both texts are united by their exposure to and critique of cultural scripts that shape women’s emotional lives. The frequent critical characterization of their narrators as emotionally flat, detached, selfish, or unloving reveals in fact the tenacity of impossible expectations surrounding maternal affect and sticking with women. Rather than simply depicting reproductive choice and motherhood as personally difficult, these texts critique dominant scripts of motherhood and challenge the core of women’s emotions and affects upon which maternal experience is socially presented. These critiques resonate with key theoretical approaches that will be developed in Chapter Two, including the conceptualization of motherhood as a patriarchal institution by Rich and its impossible standards of perfection and the theory of maternal thinking by Ruddick. These texts constitute thus a rich space to analyze how affect and narrative form interact to challenge dominant cultural narratives

Motherhood by Sheila Heti was first published in 2018. It is a fictional novel debating the question of having children. The unnamed narrator explores motherhood through numerous lenses: from the technique of flipping coins to her family’s, acquaintances’, and boyfriend’s opinions, she reports an inner conversation full of nuances. The plotless fiction delves into the expectations all women are subject to, questioning them as she tries to define her own wishes. The reproductive question is also connected to her heritage, with reflections on and memories of her relationship with her mother. Driven notably by the fear of losing her identity as a writer, the narrator reflects on the analogy between art and having children.

After bringing the reader into infinite cogitation, her childbearing years ultimately come to an end, bringing the finality of not having children, which she accepts with relief.

A Life's Work by Rachel Cusk was first published in 2001 and explores the challenging experiences of motherhood. The introduction examines her desire to write about motherhood and share her experience as a mother, which was not utopian. She also speaks about inequality for mothers caused by sexual politics. In addition, she wishes to tackle the transition from woman to mother. Finally, she hopes that other mothers can find company in her experiences. After the introduction, the book contains eleven chapters, on aspects such as pregnancy, childbirth, loss of freedom, colic, emotional attachment, and sleep, in which she shares the struggles of childbirth and early motherhood, through both her personal impressions and social reactions, often becoming entangled. While the book explores many affects, it also criticizes the representation of motherhood in parenting manuals. Through this memoir and articles on motherhood, Cusk is known for her critical approach to motherhood and her candor. Many people, especially women, expressed their shock by reading this book. As a result, Rachel Cusk added an introduction to the second edition in 2008, named "Introduction to this edition". In this prologue, as well as in other articles such as "I was only being honest", she reflects on the fierce criticism her book received and defends her approach to motherhood.

Chapter 1 - The Contemporary Discourses of Reproduction and Motherhood

As Grahn notes, “literary interpretation is closely linked to the society we live in” (30). Any analysis of maternal narratives such as Sheila Heti’s *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work* must therefore be situated within the broader socio-political, economic, scientific, and cultural transformations that shape contemporary understandings of reproduction and motherhood. In the twenty-first century, motherhood – and more generally parenthood – is no longer a stable or universally defined institution but has become a contested site where competing discourses such as neoliberalism, feminism, reproductive politics, and global capitalism intersect. While contemporary motherhood is characterized by transformation, it is also marked by contradiction, where gendered ideologies continue to regulate maternal identities and expectations despite developments in reproductive technologies and changing family structures. This chapter outlines these contemporary dynamics, emphasizing the ambivalence between their emancipatory possibilities and their constraints. However, it is important to be aware that it is written from an occidental perspective, which can influence the observations, beliefs, and systems that are described.

I first examine how motherhood is shaped by the entanglement of the personal and the political, considering the ways in which social, political, and economic structures influence reproductive practices and experiences. I then turn to the transformations of contemporary parenthood, including changing family formations, reproductive technologies, gender roles, and parenting expectations, while highlighting the persistence of traditional maternal ideals – notably through the figure of the “tradwife” (Proctor, 7) – alongside these developments. I subsequently consider how capitalist and neoliberal logic increasingly frame reproductive as a matter of individual choice, before examining the structural, socio-economic, and environmental conditions that complicate this notion of choice and the emergence of Reproductive Justice as an alternative framework.

Contemporary discourses of motherhood are deeply embedded in broader social structures. As Fahlgren et al. argue, discussions of motherhood today “intertwine the personal and the political”, incorporating issues of “class, ethnicity, labor, and domesticity” (149). Furthermore, what counts as motherhood varies across contexts. As Lanser demonstrates, motherhood cannot be understood as a “universal” experience: it is valued differently depending on class, geography, and political regimes (2015, 27). Lanser illustrates for instance that “staying home full time [...] has a positive valence for the well-to-do mother but a negative valence for the poor one who, it is assumed, should not be having babies in the first place” (2015, 27). Such disparities demonstrate that motherhood is not only socially constructed but also stratified along classes, reinforcing inequalities in how motherhood is valued and judged (Lanser, 2015, 27).

The contrast between pronatalist policies in some regions and restrictive birth control regimes in others underscores how reproduction remains deeply politicized. Furthermore, reproductive choices are embedded in structural inequalities such as access to "maternal healthcare, fertility treatments, and contraception", rather than reducible to individual preference (Delanerolle et al., 4). Access to reproductive healthcare, for instance, remains uneven globally, as safe and legal abortions continue to be "heavily debated, and indeed an illegal practice, in many places" (Grahn, 17). In addition, developments in reproductive technologies, such as in vitro fertilization, complicate the notion of choice by expanding possibilities while at the same time reinforcing inequalities by remaining unevenly distributed across socio-economic groups (Delanerolle et al., 4-5). Reproductive governance has historically functioned as a mechanism through which states "exert authority over life itself", regulating who can reproduce and under what conditions (Delanerolle et al., 3). Examples such as China's One-Child Policy demonstrate how demographic control reflects broader political and economic strategies "under the guise of neutrality" (Delanerolle et al., 4).

This entanglement between the personal and the political is not new: historically, discourses on motherhood have always been shaped by mechanisms of social control, including reproductive regulation, sexual norms, and economic organization (Ambrosini, 278). However, transformations in the twenty-first century have introduced a new tension: while reproductive practices remain subject to political and economic regulation, "technological advancements, changes in social norms, and evolving lifestyles" have at the same time expanded the possibilities of becoming a parent, and parenting dynamics are reframed through global changes (Kurt, 4). Contemporary transformations have thus liberated reproductive choices and reconfigured the conditions under which such choices are made.

Another major change in recent decades has been the broader acceptance of gender equality and varied family formations (Kurt, 4) that are not defined by a married or cohabiting partnership, nor by heterosexual parental figures (Donath et al., 3). Advances in assisted reproductive technologies (ARTs) have separated sexuality, gestation, and genetic parenthood, thereby redefining kinship and enabling new family forms (Henriksson et al., 3). Expanding possibilities beyond heteronormative constraints has enabled new forms of participation in parenthood particularly for LGBTQ+ individuals (Porter et al., 119). As understandings of family expand beyond the traditional nuclear model of mother-father-child structure, more diverse configurations have emerged, accompanied by greater social acceptance with an emphasis on inclusivity (Kurt, 4). Other contributing factors to this fluidity of family structures are linked to demographic and social changes, such as declining fertility rates, delayed childbearing, and rising divorce rates (Donath et al., 3; Houser, 619).

However, the plurality of family forms is not always reflected in the legal regulations governing parenthood, such as adoption and surrogacy (Delanerolle et al., 5). LGBTQ+ individuals who wish to become parents often encounter additional legal and social barriers, as many adoption systems and surrogacy frameworks continue to reflect outdated

assumptions about family and parenthood (Delanerolle et al., 5). Consequently, prospective parents who could provide supportive and stable homes may face unnecessary and prejudiced "obstacles rooted in traditional norms rather than current ethical, social, or medical understandings" (Delanerolle et al., 5).

Alongside these changes in family structures, expectations surrounding parenthood have also been reconfigured, particularly in relation to gender roles and caregiving practices (Kurt, 2; Jarvis et al., 32). Parenthood is increasingly framed as a shared responsibility, with growing expectations for paternal involvement (Kurt, 3). Furthermore, many countries – especially in "the global North" – have adopted measures marking progress toward more gender equality, which has been reflected in more equal expectations that both men and women share childcare duties while also engaging in paid work beyond the household (Henriksson et al., 2). At the same time, feminist critiques have pointed to an ideological discourse of "smashing the glass ceiling and raising a family", in which women are simultaneously encouraged to pursue careers and to embrace intensive motherhood (Johnson et al., 1164). This ideology is often framed through the expectation that women "can have it all", combining professional success with full maternal devotion (Johnson et al., 1164). This expectation is central to Douglas' and Michaels' "new momism" (Hallstein, 2017, 3), a concept that will be developed in Chapter Two. However, this discourse ignores the lived difficulties of combining both roles (Jarvis et al., 32).

This simultaneous expectation to pursue a career and fulfil intensive maternal ideals thus contributes to the persistence of a perceived incompatibility between career and motherhood reinforcing the notion that women must choose between the two (Chodorow, 1187). The fears about work on one side and those about motherhood on the other side converge thus "into the single conscious conflict: career versus motherhood" (Chodorow, 1187). However, Chodorow suggests that the framing of such opposition between career and family risks obscuring the complexity of "conflicts and ambivalence about motherhood" (Chodorow, 1187), an ambivalence that will be explored in Chapter Two. Moreover, the positioning of women within the domestic sphere emerges from the interaction between biological factors and the dynamics of capitalist production (Porter et al., 120). The "impact of the period of childbearing on women" affects women's perceived value as workers, placing them at a disadvantage in the labor market compared to men, which consequently reinforces their greater role in domestic responsibilities, rather than "the other way around" (Porter et al., 120).

These developments towards greater gender equality and diversification of family norms, however, have also led to increased conservative discourses promoting the idealized figure of the mother, notably in Northern Europe (Henriksson et al., 3). These conservative thoughts present motherhood as a full-time vocation, encouraging women to disengage from paid work (Henriksson et al., 3). Such gender-essentialist views persist in equating femininity with motherhood and reinforcing the stigmatization of women without children (Hummer,

1100). Even in contexts where opting out of parenthood is increasingly visible, motherhood is still widely perceived as the default life path (Donath et al., 2). This rise of conservatism is particularly visible in the figure of the tradwife, described as a woman who views domesticity as the primary source of happiness, who devotes herself exclusively to her family and home rather than pursuing paid employment, and who adheres to traditional gender roles and promotes them on social media (Proctor, 7). While the term "tradwife" has been used occasionally for several decades, it has witnessed a notable surge in popularity since 2020 (Proctor, 7).

Alongside these tensions between changing family structures, more egalitarian gender roles, and the persistence of conservative traditional ideals, contemporary parenthood is increasingly characterized by strong expectations of "good parenting", for instance with an emphasis on "nurturing their children and providing them with emotional support, rather than using strict discipline techniques as was common in the past" (Kurt, 3). Digital technologies play a role in shaping these expectations, as access to online information increases parental awareness and knowledge while at the same time intensifying pressures to make informed and "correct" parenting decisions (Jarvis et al., 32; Kurt 1-3). However, social media and blogs may allow parents to feel understood through sharing stories and connecting with other parents (Kurt, 6). The proliferation of digital technologies also presents a challenge in the sense that parents need to "ensure that [their children] are using technology in a safe and responsible way" (Kurt, 10). These changes thus contribute to heightened pressures on individuals, particularly women, who are expected to excel simultaneously in professional and familial domains (Jarvis et al., 32).

These transformations must also be understood within the broader expansion of capitalistic logic, which incorporates "every corner of society", including procreation itself (Porter et al., 116-117). Technologies such as IVF, surrogacy, and prenatal testing illustrate how reproduction has been reorganized within systems of production, often leading to forms of "alienation" where individuals lose control over reproductive processes – "carrying, birthing, feeding, and raising of children" (Porter et al., 117). The global surrogacy market, for instance, connects wealthy individuals, often from the Global North, with reproductive labor frequently performed by economically vulnerable women in the Global South, revealing inequalities structured along class, race, and nationality (Porter et al., 117). Over the last century, the rapid expansion of the medical industry, or "biomedical empire", has brought pregnancy and childbirth under the influence of capitalist economic organization across the globe (Porter et al., 117).

However, as Porter et al. remark, drawing attention to the ongoing transformations in reproductive practices and their issues should not be interpreted as a simplistic rejection of reproductive technologies, as they have many benefits, nor as a longing for a return to traditional practices (119). In addition, human reproduction has always been shaped by change, and there is no fixed tradition to reclaim (Porter et al., 119). The technological and

social infrastructures involved are not inherently harmful, and developments such as the ability to save premature infants highlight their value (Porter et al., 119). What Porter et al. wish to emphasize in their analysis of capitalism and procreation is that the advantages of the new technologies and social developments are frequently praised without sufficient attention to their real-world applications (119). Their impact can only be fully understood in relation to the broader social contexts in which they are embedded (Porter et al., 119).

These changes are also rooted in the process of individualization, influencing contemporary reproductive discourse, which prioritizes personal interests and needs in the name of "freedom of choice" (Donath et al., 3). Individuals are thus encouraged to choose family arrangements that support self-realization and emotional fulfillment, while also legitimizing the decision to leave unsatisfying relationships and form new ones (Donath et al., 3). The emergence of terms such as "childfree", replacing "childless", reflects this shift toward recognizing non-parenthood as an intentional life choice (Donath et al., 3).

This rhetoric of choice must be understood within the framework of neoliberal capitalism. Neoliberal ideology constructs individuals as autonomous, rational actors who are responsible for managing their own lives and outcomes, disposing of "free will with regard to their chosen paths of life" (Donath et al., 4). Moreover, central to neoliberal ideology is the belief that every adult citizen should be economically active to maximize both national and global economic growth (Jarvis et al., 32). Discourses of parenthood are also increasingly shaped by market logics, as decisions about reproduction become entangled with considerations of career, financial stability, and lifestyle optimization (Donath et al., 3). Parents are "expected to assume greater responsibility to mould children to become [...] effective citizens within a market-driven economy" (Jarvis et al., 40). These expectations align with neoliberal ideologies that position parenting as a site of productivity, where children are understood as future economic actors requiring careful cultivation (Jarvis et al., 31-32). Within this ideology, reproductive decisions are thus framed as freely chosen, obscuring the structural constraints that shape them (Donath et al., 4). Indeed, such an interpretation is insufficient, as it ignores the ways in which social norms, economic pressures, and institutional structures continue to limit women's autonomy and reinforce the association between motherhood and women's life purpose (Donath et al., 4). In this context, the narrative of empowerment through choice can function ideologically, which McRobbie names "faux-feminism", masking the systemic conditions that constrain reproductive decisions (Johnson et al., 1164).

The emphasis on individual responsibility does not eliminate uncertainties around reproductive decisions, which are intensified by socio-economic and environmental conditions. As Houser observes, contemporary childfree discourse frequently invokes concerns such as financial and political instability, ecological anxieties, and competing life goals, factors which are now increasingly framed in relation to wider global issues like racism, pandemics, climate change, and global economic uncertainty (620). Environmental concerns,

for instance, led to the creation of movements such as "Population Connection", which targets "the effects of "overpopulation" on the environment and food security" (Houser, 620). Additionally, intersectional perspectives highlight that climate-related reproductive concerns are experienced differently across racial and socio-economic groups, challenging "the white bias of reproductive studies in the US" (Houser, 622). Reproductive decisions are thus situated within a landscape of uncertainty, where personal choices are inseparable from collective anxieties about the future.

An important framework rising from these dynamics is that of Reproductive Justice (RJ), which places reproductive choices such as pregnancy, childbirth, and parenting within a complex web of structural conditions, prioritizing access to "safe and supportive environments, medical institutions; labor conditions, and care networks" (Houser, 624). Originating from Black women activists in 1994, it challenges the narrow focus on individual choice within the predominantly white reproductive rights movements of the 1960s and 1970s, foregrounding the issues of coercion, inequality, and systemic constraint (Houser, 624). Indeed, while Reproductive Justice recognizes that the *Griswold v. Connecticut* and *Roe v. Wade* cases in the United States and the *Criminal Law Amendment Act* in Canada[1] represent major legal victories, as they expanded reproductive rights in meaningful ways, they argue that they are not enough because they were built around the idea of individual choice, ignoring the real ability women have to choose, given their social, economic, and political conditions (Houser, 624).

As a conclusion, the contemporary context of motherhood is marked by ambivalence and contradictions (Henriksson et al., 2). On the one hand, there have been significant advances toward gender equality, including more egalitarian expectations regarding childcare and employment, and greater acceptance of diverse family configurations. On the other hand, these advances coexist with a resurgence of conservative ideologies that reassert traditional maternal roles. Motherhood is simultaneously constructed as a choice and as an obligation, a source of fulfillment and a site of constraint. Women are encouraged to exercise autonomy while being held accountable to enduring normative expectations. Neoliberal discourses of choice, technological innovations, and shifting social norms have transformed the landscape of reproduction, while enduring gender ideologies and structural inequalities continue to shape women's experiences. The result, at least in many postindustrial countries such as the United States, is that "women are increasingly delaying childbearing", yet most of them "eventually do become mothers" (Hummer, 1099).

This context is important for understanding the literary representations of motherhood in Cusk's *A Life's Work* and Heti's *Motherhood*. Although Cusk and Heti write

[1] *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) was a U.S. Supreme Court decision that struck down a state ban on contraceptive use on the basis of a constitutional right to marital privacy. *Roe v. Wade* (1973) recognized a constitutional right to abortion under the right to privacy. The *Criminal Law Amendment Act* (1968-9) decriminalized consensual homosexual relations between adults and permitted access to contraception and therapeutic abortion under specific conditions in Canada.

from societies where reproductive decisions are recognized as individual choices, their works reveal that reproductive autonomy is never purely individual. The ambivalence and other affects that characterize these texts, articulated and intensified by form, can be read as responses to the contradictions outlined in this chapter. By foregrounding uncertainty, conflict, and non-traditional experiences of maternal happiness, these works reflect, interrogate, and resist these contemporary discourses. They reveal the limits and issues of dominant narratives of maternal choice and fulfillment, offering alternative ways of imagining motherhood in the twenty-first century. Such a myth of maternal fulfillment, among others, is explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 2 - Motherhood Studies & Myths of Motherhood

This chapter traces the emergence of motherhood studies within gender studies and the matrophobia it was first confronted with. It outlines key feminist scholars that have played a role in the creation of motherhood studies and their theories. It then presents the different myths that dominate the twenty-first century and their complications, before turning to mother-centered studies revealing the real experiences of mothers which are impacted by these ideologies. Finally, it delves briefly into certain strategies scholars have identified to resist and deconstruct these unachievable standards, which will lead to the next chapter on the rise of life writing. This chapter demonstrates that (the reality of) motherhood still holds a marginal and stigmatized place in society, and that motherhood is both a biological concept and a social construct impacting all women, whether they desire to have children or not. The concepts presented in this section are central to the analysis of Cusk's *A Life's Work* and Heti's *Motherhood*, which both feature the impact of, awareness of, and resistance to idealized motherhood.

2.1. Matrophobia & the Emergence of Motherhood studies

This overview of motherhood studies provides the conceptual grounding for this thesis. After introducing the place of motherhood within gender studies, I will explain key pioneers and concepts that have led to the creation of motherhood studies by O'Reilly. The different concepts developed within this field show that maternal identity is constructed by cultural norms, institutional expectations, and ideological pressures – structures that Cusk and Heti both confront in their writing. At the same time, intersectional critiques remind us that no maternal narrative speaks for all mothers.

The emergence of motherhood studies cannot be understood without acknowledging the uneasy place motherhood has held in gender studies and feminist movements. Although gender studies are a comparatively recent addition to the academy, much of the scholarship in the field emerges from the growth of women's movements of the 1970s and 1980s, as well as from the establishment and expansion of Women's Studies – which aimed to put gender, and more specifically women, on the political agenda (Woodward, 2). Even if feminist studies remain central to the field, the shift toward gender studies in the 1990s "also reflects a widening intellectual base, including psychosocial as well as psychoanalytical theories, poststructuralist, postcolonial studies, critical studies of masculinity, queer studies and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer) critical race, critiques of whiteness, ecological feminism and materialist feminism" (Woodward, 2). O'Reilly reports that "it has been said that motherhood is the unfinished business of feminism" (2014, 3). According to her, matricentric feminism (i.e. feminism centered around mothers) "still remains marginal to Feminist Theory and Women's Studies more generally" (O'Reilly, 2014, 4). Scholars even talk about a "marginalization, if not invisibility," of motherhood in Women's Studies (O'Reilly, 2014, 5). When mothers called for feminism for mothers, it was not understood and "was not met with

the same respect or recognition" as submovements like queer feminism and socialist feminism (O'Reilly, 2014, 5). However, as O'Reilly argues, mothers do not exist merely as women but as women whose identities are modulated by motherhood, in the same way that Black women's lives are shaped by their racialized identity (2014, 5).

This matrophobia can be mostly explained by second-wave feminism viewing motherhood as a major, if not the principal, source of women's oppression within patriarchy (O'Reilly, 2014, 7). Additionally, because feminists generally reject notions of gender essentialism – the idea that men and women are naturally defined in particular ways –, motherhood becomes particularly problematic as its biological basis highlights gender difference (O'Reilly, 2014, 7). Despite these complications, O'Reilly believes that "feminists should not disavow motherhood to facilitate this destabilizing of gender" and encourages "a specific feminism for mothers" (2014, 9). Hallstein argues that this matrophobia was probably necessary for second-wave feminism, "so that women could imagine an alternative to the all-consuming, patriarchal 'ideal Mother' subject position", but that contemporary feminism now needs a new understanding of feminist maternal identity – one that rejects modern forms of matrophobia and resists the constraints imposed by institutionalized motherhood (2006, 105). These debates have also become more complicated in the last years with the rise of new conservative movements and the "tradwife" explained in Chapter One, as feminists attempt to find the balance between matrophobia and far right resistance.

The discussion on motherhood studies and feminist mothering starts with Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* published in 1976, a book in which she introduced the distinction between two meanings of motherhood (O'Reilly, 2008, 3): "the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children"; and "the institution – which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control" (Rich in O'Reilly, 2008, 3). In other words, the term *motherhood* designates the patriarchal structure that confines women within male-centered, controlling and oppressive norms, whereas *mothering* describes women's own experiences of care, defined by women themselves and holding the potential for empowerment (O'Reilly, 2008, 3). Rich's differentiation between *motherhood* and *mothering* challenged the Second Wave feminists' notion of motherhood as inherently oppressive. Once disentangled from patriarchal control, mothering could instead be reclaimed as a space of empowerment and social transformation – if women, in Rich's words, became "outlaws from the institution of motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2008, 3). She also linked mothers' feelings of exhaustion and guilt to the patriarchal construction of motherhood, which isolates women and burdens them with impossible standards of perfection (O'Reilly, 2008, 2).

Another pioneer of maternal scholarship is Nancy Chodorow (O'Reilly, 2010, 8), with her canonical work *The Reproduction of Motherhood* in 1978, in which she states that "women mother because they were mothered" (Bueskens, 3). With the asymmetrical gender roles of the modern western family, mothers often mother in isolation while fathers work,

leading to an "intergenerational transmission" from mother to daughter (Bueskens, 4). Even though her theory is less generally applicable in the twenty-first century with the diversification of family models, this intergenerational transmission still has an impact nowadays, as will be seen in the analysis of *Motherhood*. She also argued that being a mother is "a task, not an innate instinct." (Ambrosini, 277).

Two years later, in 1980, was published the "monumental text" *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* by Sara Ruddick, which was received as one of "the most significant works in maternal scholarship and the new field of motherhood studies" (O'Reilly, 2009, 295). Ruddick described her work as "the first attempt to describe, from a philosophical perspective, the thinking that grows out of the work mothers do." (Ruddick in O'Reilly, 2009, 296). The foundation of her work reveals that the practice of mothering is inherently intellectual; motherwork requires thought, judgment, and reflection (O'Reilly, 2009, 296). From this observation, she seeks to redefine mothering by separating it from biology, framing it instead as a practice shaped by maternal thinking (O'Reilly, 2009, 296). In fulfilling the demands of motherwork, mothers engage in maternal practice, which in turn cultivates a specific form of thought – shaped by distinctive attitudes, cognitive abilities, and values – that she identifies as "maternal thinking" (O'Reilly, 2009, 296). While Rich identified the distinction between *motherhood* and *mothering*, "Ruddick was the first scholar to examine the experience of mothering, as opposed to the institution of motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2009, 296). She defined mothering as a practice, indicating that it is not a biologically determined role but a practice that can be carried out by anyone committing to the demands of maternal practice (O'Reilly, 2009, 296). Ruddick therefore wishes to shift the term *mother* from a noun to a verb, detaching motherwork from its traditional gendered connotations (O'Reilly, 2009, 297). She also argues that mothers are controlled by "the gaze of the others", under which they yield judgment to others and consequently feel determined in their value by society's ideals (Bisht, 123).

In 1996, Sharon Hays further contributed to debates around motherhood with her analysis of the "ideology of intensive mothering", which she first described in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (Green, 2015, 198). Based on Rich's concept of motherhood as a patriarchal institution, Hays declared that this institution took "the common form of intensive mothering" in today's Western world, consisting of mothers taking "better care of their children than they do of themselves" (Green, 2015, 198). She believed this ideology supports the power structures of "neoliberal, white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy" (Green, 2015, 199). The sociologist characterized intensive mothering as "child-centered, expert guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive" (Hays in Green, 2015, 198). She distinguished three principles of intensive mothering. First, it requires that women occupy the central, dominant role in caring for children (Hallstein, 2006, 97). Second, it obliges mothers to devote extensive time and energy to their children (Hallstein, 2006, 97). And third, it relies on a logic that divides maternal care (i.e. mothering) and paid employment (Hallstein, 2006, 97). Hays concluded that intensive mothering

continues to cast women in the role of "the self-sacrificing ideal mother", limiting their autonomy in professional and public life (Hallstein, 2006, 97). Finally, Hays argued it is also essential to not only look at the ideological and structural components of intensive mothering, but also at the psychological dimension, because many women "feel a deep commitment to their children and they do not experience this feeling as something men impose on them" (Hays in Hallstein, 2006, 97). Despite her critical view of intensive mothering, Hays acknowledges the importance of mothers' love and their desire to take care of their children to understand contemporary maternity (Hallstein, 2006, 100).

By 1998, roughly two decades after Rich's groundbreaking *Of Woman Born*, motherhood had become a subject of scholarly debate across diverse disciplines, including anthropology and women's studies (O'Reilly, 2010, 7). Andrea O'Reilly founded the *Association for Research on Mothering*, the *Journal of the Association for Research on Mothering,* and Demeter press, the "first feminist press on motherhood" (O'Reilly, 2010, 6). In the first decade of the millennium, motherhood studies came to be recognized as a distinct field within feminist and women's studies and evolved into a firmly established domain of academic research (O'Reilly, 2010, 7). In 2006, O'Reilly introduced the term *motherhood studies* to recognize and legitimize the growing academic field on motherhood, drawing on the foundations of maternal theory established by figures such as Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Sharon Hays, Fiona Green, Marianne Hirsch, and Sara Ruddick (O'Reilly, 2010, 7). Comparable to emergence of women's studies in the 1970s, motherhood studies has established itself as an independent scholarly field, even as it remains interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, and multidisciplinary (O'Reilly, 2010, 7). Motherhood studies use Rich's foundation of the terms *motherhood* to refer to the patriarchal institution and *mothering* to the mothers' lived experiences (O'Reilly, 2010, 7).

In her *Encyclopedia of Motherhood*, Andrea O'Reilly divides motherhood studies into four interconnected categories of analysis: motherhood as institution, motherhood as experience, motherhood as identity or subjectivity, and motherhood as agency (O'Reilly, 2010, 8). Scholars examining the institution category analyze policies, laws, cultural ideologies and representations that sustain patriarchal constructions of motherhood, while those focusing on the dimension of experience examine the actual practices of mothering, drawing on Sara Ruddick's notion of maternal practice (O'Reilly, 2010, 8). The third category investigates how motherhood reshapes women's self-conception, shaped by both the institution of motherhood and the lived realities of maternal experience (O'Reilly, 2010, 8). Motherhood as agency is interested in how motherhood as institution, experience, or identity, is harmful to women because of its patriarchal framing (O'Reilly, 2010, 8).

Another more recent contemporary motherhood theorist alongside O'Reilly is Fiona Joy Green. Of the opinion that Adrienne Rich's "mothering" was not sufficiently researched, she worked on how motherhood can be "a site of empowerment and political activism for women", even when restrained by patriarchy (Green, 2004, 126), exploring thereby the

consequences feminist mothers face when they do not meet the standards of ideal motherhood. Related to research of 'mothering', she also investigated 'matricentric feminism', a term coined by O'Reilly in 2011 "to describe a mother-centred feminism" (O'Reilly, 2014, 3) which is a mode of feminism "based upon the particular identity, knowledge, work, and politics of mothers" (Green, 2019, 87). Green identified five characteristics shared by feminist mothers. First, "feminist" and "mother" are for them intertwined, inseparable roles (Green, 2019, 87). This combined identity guides their worldview and approach to parenting (Green, 2019, 97). Second, this worldview recognizes and challenges patriarchal structures (Green, 2019, 87). Third, they understand that individuals' personal experiences are directly shaped by the social, economic, and political conditions around them, and that patriarchy influences these experiences (Green, 2019, 87). Fourth, lasting and significant change in women's lives and other oppressed groups requires the elimination of patriarchy and interconnected systems of oppression, because they place autonomy and freedom of choice as central (Green, 2019, 87). And fifth, feminist mothers believe in a matricentric feminist praxis that they integrate into their motherwork (Green, 2019, 88). In addition, Green carried on Hays' research of intensive mothering. She states that this ideology positions mothers – rather than fathers or other adults – as the figure expected to give themselves wholly to their children, investing among others limitless time, affective and physical energy, financial resources, and emotional care (Green, 2019, 89). It frames child-caring as a mother's priority, obliging her to sacrifice her own needs while following the guidance of mostly male specialists in child development (Green, 2019, 89). Chapter One revealed that while alternate conceptions of parenthood are becoming more common in the twenty-first century, the mother is still often expected to take charge of children's everyday care (Jarvis et al., 31).

While this thesis focuses on two white, Western authors, it is important to note that motherhood studies is not a homogeneous field (Beyer, 3). Motherhood is lived through intersecting structures of race, class, sexuality, and nationality among others, meaning that maternal identity is shaped by a plurality of characteristics and cannot be reduced to a definite set of experiences (Lanser, 2013, 7). For instance, Hallstein admits in *Rereading Adrienne Rich* that her analysis "is of white second-wave feminists' responses to motherhood, because contemporary feminist scholars have shown decisively that black mothers and black feminists have had a very different relationship to mothering" (2010, 20). She also mentions that black feminist scholars have shown that African American citizens have long used, and still use, mothering practices that differ from white norms, including "othermothering" and "community mothering" (Hallstein, 2010, 20). Therefore, even if intensive mothering impacts all women, the ideology itself is Eurocentric and constructed around the experiences of white, upper-middle class mothers (Hallstein, 2006, 106). Other scholars whose theories are used in this paper, such as O'Reilly and Green, acknowledge that their research is influenced by "cisgender, white, temporarily able-bodied and currently cognitively competent, middle-class, educated, heterosexual, married mother" (Green, 2015, 197), or even restricted to,

"Anglo and African American ideologies [...] of motherhood". (Knott, 2009, 103). Recognizing these limitations is essential, as it defines the cultural position from which Cusk and Heti write and ensures that the analysis does not claim their experiences as universal.

This overview of the rise of motherhood studies within gender studies helps to understand matrophobia and the key concepts that have been developed in this field. Within this theoretical landscape, the maternal perspectives developed by Cusk and Heti appear as interventions in ongoing debates about what mothers should be and how they should behave. In order to better understand the specific normative standards which women and mothers are confronted with, the following paragraphs delve into the different myths of idealized motherhood.

2.2. Myths of motherhood

This section addresses the apparition of modern idealized motherhood, followed by the contemporary myths that affect and trap women. These cultural scripts will be then confronted with a body of literature focused on women- and mother-centered lived experiences, which exposes the "myth-reality discrepancy" (Choi et al., 168), before turning to the literature focused on childless women. Finally, I will introduce various way in which women may negotiate or resist these normative expectations. It is important to remember that mothers cannot be examined as a "universal maternal subject who is oppressed by the institution of motherhood in homogenous ways", and that the myths explored in this chapter are "often based on middle-class or upper-middle-class life for white people" (Beyer, 3). As this study focuses on two white Canadian writers, these maternal archetypes can be used as analytical tools, however with the awareness that it is limited to a certain type of mothers.

The myths of motherhood that are presented below present normative characteristics as if inherent to women's and mothers' nature. However, when looking at the historical evolution of the ideology of motherhood, it is clearly visible that standards have been changing, leading to the conclusion that ideal motherhood is socially and culturally constructed. For instance, women of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries commonly sent their children away in their early years to be raised by another authority, because it was believed to benefit their health and education (Hager, 38-39). It is since the end of the eighteenth century and beginning of the nineteenth century – particularly with the Industrial Revolution and the Victorian Era – that the role of the mother became increasingly idealized, acquiring strong symbolic meaning beyond its reproduction function (Abrams, 6; Hager, 39). With the Industrial Revolution the strict separation between home and work reinforced the association of women with the domestic sphere, while the Victorian Era promoted the image of the angelic mother remaining "at home with her children" (Hager, 39).

In the twenty-first century, myths on motherhood persist and influence the maternal expectations, interrogations and experiences women and mothers undergo. In today's interconnected society, these scripts circulate through different media such as movies,

literature, and advertisements, bearing a part in the construction of these maternal archetypes (Mary et al., 170). These myths are often intertwined but are placed in this thesis into four broad categories: the 'self-sacrificing mother', the 'happy mother', the 'natural mother', and the 'supermom'. Together, they form part of a broader ideological framework often referred to as the 'good mother' ideal (Green, 2015, 198), also called 'idealized motherhood' (Thapa, 112), 'the motherhood mystique' (Green, 2015, 199), 'intensive mothering' by Hays, 'patriarchal mothering' by O'Reilly, and 'the new momism' by Douglas and Michaels (Hallstein, 2017, 2). These different myths will be then contrasted with their antipode, the myth of the 'bad bother', before turning to how childlessness is represented in this motherhood mystique.

First, the 'self-sacrificing mother' or 'selfless mother' has unconditional motherlove, tenderness, and compassion for her children, whose needs are placed above her own (Lewis, 38; Bisht, 118). She is presented as the "child's primary attachment figure, regardless of whether she works outside the home or not" (Green, 2015, 199). She sets herself aside for her children, denying her own needs and aspirations, and sacrifices her identity (Hager, 36-37; Lewis, 38). However, this sacrifice is effortless because it comes from motherlove (Bisht, 199). This maternal care exists through "an extreme lack of egoism" (Hager, 36): "the more selfless the devotion and dedication, the better the mother is considered to be [...]; it is through the denial of the self, that the mother achieves the status of a 'good' mother" (Bisht, 118). Because her priority is her children (Green, 2015, 199), an "implicit, and sometimes explicit, view" is that the mother will make her children suffer if she tries to combine motherhood with paid work or other activities (Lewis, 35). That part of the 'self-sacrificing mother' myth clashes with the 'supermom' myth, which is reviewed in one of the next paragraphs, revealing the contradictions present in the motherhood mystique and the impossibility of being a 'perfect mother'.

Second, the happy mother myth refers to motherhood as the ultimate fulfilment in a woman's life, procuring a joy that cannot be reproduced (Lewis, 35; Hummer, 1108). Motherhood is presented as the most significant accomplishment and the culminating point in a woman's life (Thapa, 111), even portraying it as the most important part of a woman's life and the "most successful role" "regardless of any professional or educational success a woman might have had prior to motherhood" (Thapa, 111; Hallstein, 2017, 3). This motherhood mystique also conveys the idea that no woman can really be whole "unless she has kids" (Hallstein, 2017, 2). Joy does not come only from having children but also from devotion to them (Hager, 35), promising a 'happy ever after' myth (Lewis, 32).

Third, the natural mother myth portrays all the qualities that make a woman a 'good mother' and the happiness that stems from it as "natural expressions of maternity" (Kawash, 983). It encompasses the so-called biological destiny and natural maternal instinct of women. First, the desire to have children is depicted as a biological imperative, and mothers who do not feel that are seen as "abnormal" (Hager, 35). All women are therefore "expected to want

to become mothers or to justify themselves if they do not have children" (Lewis, 32). Additionally, women are repeatedly told from a young age that they are destined to have children (Bisht, 120). Besides this "natural need" completing a woman, this so-called feminine urge should also stem from this promise of fulfilment explained in the happy mother myth (Lewis, 32). Furthermore, it is put forward in this myth that the maternal instinct does not have to be learned when the baby is born as it has always been part of the female nature (Hager, 35). Even before becoming mothers, women are stereotyped as "providers of love, care, and affection [and] beings who are softhearted and nurturing" (Thapa, 114). Mothers are accordingly "immediately able to care of their babies" (Choi et al., 168) and are for that reason promoted as primary caretaker of the child (Lewis, 33). Mothers are also perceived as "having the power to determine how their children will turn out, regardless of the social and institutional context in which they bring up their children, but are blamed if children do turn out to be less than perfect" (Lewis, 40).

Finally, the 'supermom' myth pictures mothers as able to "effortlessly" manage different roles and responsibilities, such as childcaring, domestic tasks, and employment (Thapa, 115). From childhood, women are told that they live at a time when women can "do it all": have an education, a career, and a family as long as they make good choices." (Hallstein, 2017, 3). This 'supermom' is conceptualized with "extraordinary powers that could overcome any challenges or difficulties threatening her children" (Bisht, 115). However, this figure is sometimes in contrast with the idea that the 'good mother' sacrifices her identity as woman and does not combine childcare with paid work and other demanding activities. Between these two myths of the 'self-sacrificing mother' and the 'supermom', which are both part of the 'good mother' myth, mothers are observed and judged no matter their choice.

This 'good mother' ideal is often structured in opposition to the figure of the 'bad', 'terrible', 'abnormal', 'deviant', 'devil' or 'unfit' mother who fails to meet these normative expectations (Rooks, 123; Ladd-Taylor, 7; Hager, 36; Lewis, 37-40; Green, 2004, 128). Mothers are therefore "simultaneously idealized and blamed for not living up to society's ideals" (Lewis, 32). There is a message that "there is a correct way to be a mother", and that ideal is perpetuated by co-workers, friends, family, and peers "through commentary, free advice, or personal judgement" (Green, 2004, 128). There are different characteristics that are identified with the 'bad' mother, such as prioritizing her sexual desires over her maternal responsibilities (Rooks, 124), not being partnered with a man (Green, 2004, 128), being "financially impoverished" (Green, 2004, 128), working for a living (Green, 2004, 128), putting herself first (Lewis, 40), and not meeting the standards of intensive mothering in general (Hallstein, 2017, 3). Because mothers are labeled 'selfish' for undertaking paid work, Lewis argues that it "has generated feelings of guilt and inadequacy in generations of employed mothers" (35). While mothers are easily pathologized 'unnatural' or deemed 'unfit' for small acts judged inadequate, fathers who abandon a child may on the contrary be only perceived as "irresponsible" and will remain "within the boundaries of social acceptability, especially if they continue to provide economically for the child" (Lewis, 40). Fathers are also easily

acclaimed and "crowned" as 'perfect fathers' for small actions such as changing a diaper (Thapa, 114). This exposes the double standard regarding parenthood and the colossal pressure mothers undergo.

However, Kawash argues that this 'good-bad' mother dichotomy is not so clear anymore in the twenty-first century with "transformations in family, work, and domesticity at a global level", leading to a more complex view of motherhood (983). The rise of autobiographical texts written by mothers – which will be addressed in Chapter Three – and of mothers-centered studies instead of children-centered perspectives probably plays a role in the multifaceted experience that is motherhood. Multiple scholars have also formulated many arguments against these myths. For instance, Chodorow argues that "being a mother is a task, not an innate instinct (Ambrosini, 277), and De Beauvoir that "maternal love has nothing natural about it" since it can be given from another person than the biological mother (Bisht, 121). Lewis underscores the distinction between "caring for" and "caring about": a mother can care about a child (that is feeling love and affection) while leaving childcare (that is the physical work) to someone else – because for instance of "emotional, economic or social difficulties" – and should not be deemed unnatural for that reason (36-37).

Besides the portrayal of motherhood as fulfilling and natural, these myths also construct childlessness as unnatural and socially deviant. Despite improvements in terms of gender equality developed in Chapter One, the belief that womanhood equates motherhood and the stigmatization of women's childlessness both remain (Hummer, 1100). A woman who wishes to have children but cannot is pitied, while a woman who does not intend become a mother is seen as unnatural and doomed to dissatisfaction and regret (Green, 2015, 200; Fahlgren et al., 138). Furthermore, some women remain in the stage of "wondering", unsure of the wish to have children, which tends to produce irritation within themselves, their surroundings and "society at large" (Houser, 621). Hummer also acknowledges how these myths shape women's decision regarding childlessness: shared ideas about good motherhood, including intensive mothering and the prioritization of childcare over paid work and personal needs, scare women who become reluctant to let motherhood destroy their plans (1101). "Even for women who never desire motherhood, [...] motherhood beliefs shape childlessness into a status that often warrants reflection, defense, and stigma management" (Hummer, 1102). Because of this discourse of female nature associated with maternal instinct, women with an absence of this "maternal drive" are led to believe that they are "broken", "apart" and "unnatural" (Hummer, 1109). Whether they are certain of not wanting children or not, the myths of motherhood impact "women who have not (yet) become mothers (Hummer, 1101).

On the other side of this motherhood mystique, there are studies interested in the lived experiences of mothers. Only by focusing on the experiences of mothers themselves is it possible to fully comprehend "the complexity that is motherhood" (Ambrosini, 279). The negative feelings experienced – and not those prescribed by society – are mainly caused by

two factors: 1) the myth-reality discrepancy inducing feelings of guilt, shame, and inadequacy in the mother (Choi et al., 168; Lewis, 36), 2) the work, physical suffering, and emotional overload of pregnancy, childbirth, and its aftermath (Choi et al., 168; Lewis, 36). The two following paragraphs will be dedicated to these aspects.

Firstly, “mothers may experience mental health consequences—such as maternal guilt, anxiety, or depression—when they feel they are not living up to the high standards of good motherhood” (Hummer, 1101). They are constantly exposed to internal and external pressure to conform to the ideals, and are reproved when they do not (Green, 2004, 128). The ‘natural mother myth’ makes them feel like a failure and makes it harder to ask for help (Brown, 207; Choi et al., 176). They therefore adopt what Susan Maushart calls the “mask of motherhood” (Kinser, 123), that maintains a “facade of perfect motherhood” (Thapa, 116). Furthermore, they feel like they have been lied to when they realize that reality is very different than this ideology, leading to feelings of anger (Choi et al., 172). They also struggle or are unable to find the happiness that has been promised in this idealized role of mother (Green, 2004, 128). Even after decades of feminist critique, many new mothers remain shocked by the disparity between idealized motherhood and its demanding reality (Kawash, 984). Even mothers who are fully aware that these ideals are “socially constructed and unrealistic” feel “personally responsible” for not meeting the standards (Green, 2004, 128). However, mother-centered literature does not portray motherhood only as a difficult and depressing challenge, but also acknowledges that it can be rewarding (Lewis, 33). Mothers' own accounts are indeed rarely all black or white, but rather contradictory, with motherhood perceived as both “heaven and hell” (Lewis, 32). It can be concluded from this approach “that motherhood is a social construction of impossible perfection that is internalized by all mothers” and that motherhood becomes an ambivalent experience which “results from society’s failure to legitimize a range of maternal feelings” (Lewis, 37). This question of (un)acceptable and ambivalent maternal feelings will be addressed in the part on affect.

Secondly, literature centered on the experiences of mothers emphasizes that the physical suffering of pregnancy, and especially childbirth and its aftermath, should not be underestimated. There is an exhaustion that inevitably follows childbirth, paired with “pain from childbirth procedures, and the stress resulting from having to learn the practical skills of caring for an infant” (Choi et al., 168). Furthermore, postpartum depression and anxiety are quite frequent, yet the pressure to conform to ideals of motherhood and the fear of falling short of these expectations can make it difficult for some new mothers to acknowledge their symptoms and seek help (Thapa, 116). Following childbirth, mother-centered literature presents the period after childbirth as work and exhaustion (Lewis, 36). On the one hand, research “highlights the physically hard work of mothering and the emotional strains” (Lewis 36). Feelings of isolation and emotional distress, fatigue, overload, and the weight of the big responsibilities it involves often lead to exhaustion or even depression (Lewis, 36). There is also the impact on their overall life which women find changed in all its aspects, such as the relationships with friends or partner (Lewis, 36). Especially their identity is at risk: their status

has transformed, and they may deal with the grief of their former self (Choi et al., 168). At the same time, another research tradition aims at making visible the work mothers do (Lewis, 36). Motherwork is often devalued and underestimated (Lewis, 36). Instead of judging mothering in terms of idealized motherhood, this approach emphasizes the everyday practices that are considered trivial and argues that it is important work which should be esteemed and respected (Lewis, 36).

Alongside the rise of literature centered on the real experiences of mothers, there is a growing body of studies focused on women who remain without children. These studies often debate the term that should be adopted, varying between “childless”, “childfree”, “voluntarily childless”, “involuntarily childless” and “'without children”. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter One, the emergence of the term “childfree” replacing “childless” emphasizes the dimension of individual and intentional choice, a rhetoric that is central in the context of neoliberalism (Donath et al., 3). However, Andeh argues that such a strict distinction between “childless” and “childfree” would ignore the realities of many people situated in between (125-126). Indeed, she notes the existence of a continuum, with an “ambivalence during childbearing years” rather than simply “a definite lack of choice” on the one side and “a definite decision” not to have children on the other side (Aneth et al., 125-126). Some scholars thus adopt the term “childless” or “without children” as a general term encompassing all these distinctions, while others choose a more specific term such as “childfree”, which they justify according to their study’s aim. Considering the ambivalence of Heti’s decision on the subject, illustrating that continuum, this thesis follows Andeh’s strategy and uses the terms “childless” and “without children” broadly to refer to women who are in a position of hesitation regarding reproduction and women who categorically decide not to have children.

This literature on childlessness focuses particularly on the reasons to remain without children and the consequences of that “choice”. Scholars have identified a wide range of motivations underpinning voluntary or hesitant childlessness, such as autonomy, self-realization, “general dislike of children”, and freedom, alongside considerations related to career development, financial stability, and environmental or global concerns mentioned in Chapter One (Shapiro, 4). Gendered differences nonetheless persist, as women tend to emphasize the incompatibility between parenting, career, and leisure, while men more explicitly foreground financial sacrifices associated with reproduction (Shapiro, 4). Across these reports, the notion of “freedom” or “autonomy” emerges as a central motivating factor (Shapiro, 4), though this discourse coexists with more embodied accounts in which the absence of maternal desire is described as intrinsic, expressed through claims of lacking “any desire whatsoever to have a child” or a “call to motherhood” (Peterson et al., 378). In Peterson et al.’s study, even when individuals struggled to articulate their reasons, they often described their childfree status as “obvious” and “natural”, suggesting that both the presence and absence of reproductive desire are understood as innate and embodied (Peterson et al., 380-381).

At the same time, the literature highlights the significant social and affective consequences attached to (voluntary or hesitant) childlessness, revealing how it remains deeply stigmatized despite its increased visibility. While involuntary childlessness tends to elicit pity or sympathy, voluntary childlessness is more frequently met with suspicion or disapproval (Shapiro, 9). Although some positive stereotypes circulate, associating childfree individuals with freedom, autonomy, and financial success, these straits are often reframed negatively, contributing to representations of the voluntarily childless as "selfish, individualistic, irresponsible, materialistic, and less mature" (Shapiro, 9). Many women report experiences of being stigmatized, misunderstood, and subjected to assumptions that they will eventually regret their decision (Fitzpatrick et al., 4; Peterson et al., 383). These pressures can have profound effects on self-perception, producing feelings of shame, doubt, and inadequacy, as well as a sense of lacking or "failing" in relation to dominant models of femininity (Peterson et al., 382; Fitzpatrick et al., 10). More broadly, childlessness has been associated with diminished self-esteem, disenfranchised grief, and feelings of exclusion, as societal representations continue to marginalize those who do not conform to reproductive norms (Anhed, 126). Like all choices regarding reproduction, voluntary childlessness is thus never purely individual but negotiated within a framework of social expectations that shape choices and their lived consequences.

Many scholars attempt to find ways to resist and deconstruct the motherhood mystique. Primarily, it is imperative to challenge myths of motherhood to create more inclusive and diverse discourses that enable women to experience motherhood in the best environments, and to "recognize that experiencing motherhood and having children do not universally define a 'complete woman'" (Thapa, 122). However, while institutionalized motherhood today acknowledges the changes in gender roles and expectations, it simultaneously continues to be an ideology that "keeps mothers primarily responsible, still, for childrearing and family-life management" (Hallstein, 2017, 3). A first step is to spread the concept of the 'good enough mother' (Green, 2015, 201) and the comprehension of motherhood as an ambivalent and diverse experience (Kawash, 972). In order to move away from these normative expectations – both on a personal and on a societal level –, feminist mothers have introduced "empowered mothering", based on the importance of mothers meeting their own needs (O'Reilly, 2006, 327). For these feminist mothers, "their commitment to both feminism and to children becomes expressed as maternal activism" (O'Reilly, 2006, 327).

Nevertheless, an empowered mothering remains complicated under the pressure of idealized motherhood, making evident the value of spreading heterogeneous motherhood stories. While mother-centered research is essential, a "rewriting of motherhood" defined only by women themselves is a great step towards a "recovering of motherhood" from patriarchal discourses (Bisht, 115-116). As Lewis argues, "the more mothers exhibit socially unacceptable or stigmatized behavior, the more they challenge the myth of maternal superhuman perfection" (41). By actively contesting the patriarchal ideology of motherhood

through writing and exposing the myth-reality discrepancy, women and mothers become agentic and not passive (Choi et al., 16). With that desire for emancipation, contemporary literature knows a surge in maternal memoirs exposing the journey of/ to childlessness and the struggles of motherhood. The next chapter focuses on this emergence within the broader rise of life writing in which Cusk's *A Life's Work* and Heti's *Motherhood* can be placed.

Chapter 3 - Contemporary Discourses: Life Writing & Therapeutic Narratives

This chapter examines the literary trends and cultural frameworks within contemporary literature through which maternal experience is narrated, focusing on life writing, self-help hermeneutics, and therapeutic writing. It argues that these discourses shape how motherhood is represented and establish expectations of self-knowledge (Latham et al., 5) and emotional resolution (Gladding et al., 6). By situating *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* within the rise of life writing and the influence of self-help and therapeutic writing, this chapter shows how both texts engage with, but at the same time resist, these discourses. Rather than remaining fixed by generic conventions of memoir and autofiction and adhering to the promise of self-improvement and therapeutic transformation, these texts expose their limits in their representation of irresolution and motherhood ambivalence. This chapter therefore lays out the foundations by identifying the genres and therapeutic narratives that will be engaged with in the following chapters.

The term "contemporary literature" does not designate a clearly delimited literary period but constitutes a contested category whose temporal and methodological boundaries remain subject to debate (Maguire, 495). While the term has sometimes been used to refer broadly to literature produced after the Second World War, or even 1965, it is more generally associated with literature of a recent present, although the precise temporal boundaries of the category remain difficult to establish (Maguire, 495). In this thesis, the term "contemporary literature" will primarily be used to refer to literature published in the twenty-first century, which encompasses the two primary texts examined here: Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* (2001) and Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* (2018).

3.1. The Rise of Life Writing in Contemporary Literature

While Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* has been categorized as a memoir, Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* blurs the lines between fiction and autobiography in her exploration of motherhood (Fahlgren et al., 138). Clarifying the distinctions between different terms such as memoir, autobiography, and life narrative is therefore essential to situating the two works within the broader field of contemporary life writing. This section examines the rise of life writing in contemporary literature and then outlines the key generic categories and characteristics relevant to this analysis.

Scholars have shown that the boundaries between the different forms of life writing, such as memoir and autobiography, are far from fixed. Publishers and critics, for instance, sometimes have different understandings of the autobiographical genre (Buss, 793). Furthermore, the development of Autobiography Studies since the 1960s has significantly reshaped the concept of autobiography, broadening it to a more flexible and general category of life writing, including for instance written and non-written texts (Schmidt, 49). At the same

time, the growth of life writing studies has led the field to move beyond “prescribed” definitions of self- and other-writing (Schmidt, 50), an evolution which underscores the complexity of fixing precise boundaries for these terms. The definitions adopted in this study may differ from other approaches and should not be regarded as stable or rigid.

Although life writing itself is far from new, as “people have written about themselves since people could write” (Showalter, 2025), the fascination with life narratives stems from transformations in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries contributing to the formation of notions of personhood, including the Enlightenment, the rise of social Darwinism, and the Industrial Revolution (Smith et al., 112). These occurrences encouraged the construction of the Western subject as “an accomplished and exceptional individual” (Smith et al., 112). Building on these developments, “the enormous craving for the real in the twenty-first century” (Showalter, §14) and the ideological dominance of individualism in contemporary culture (Smith et al., 109), autobiographical literature turned around the turn of the millennium into an international development of importance (Schoof, 336). Julie Rak describes this surge as the “memoir boom”, an “explosion of the published memoirs in the literary market since the early 1990s” (Thielhorn, 2019). The genre of the memoir has especially flourished in the United States and Great Britain (Thielhorn, 2019) and has allowed women to voice their ideas concerning issues such as sexual inequalities (Jones, 2024).

If the complex category of life writing experiences a significant expansion in publications at the turn of the millennium, there are however some differences between autobiography, memoir, and other subgenres. *Life writing* operates as an umbrella term for various forms of writing centered on a life, including biography, fiction, or self-representation (Smith et al., 3). In contrast to *life writing*, which refers to writing about lives in general – and can be “biographical, novelistic, historical, or an explicit self-reference to the writer” –, *life narratives* are understood as a more restricted range of self-referential writings, among them autobiography (Smith et al., 3).

Among the many forms of life narratives, *autobiography* and *memoir* are frequently treated as interchangeable, yet they carry distinct connotations that are important for this study. In Smith et al., Philippe Lejeune expanded the brief definition of *autobiography* of “self-life writing” to describe it as a retrospective prose narrative in which an individual recounts their own existence, placing the principal accent on their life and, in particular, on the development of their own personality (1). The term *memoir* is based on the French word “memory” and is a subgenre of autobiography (Thielhorn, 1). It is typically more concise and focused on a part or a theme of the narrator’s life (Thielhorn, 1). Memoir is therefore “a form of self-reflective writing that is personal, often controversial, and a meditation about the place of self in history” (Whitlock in Schmidt, 49). Where the autobiography is usually a more comprehensive narrative of one’s life, the memoir focuses on a specific experience, such as motherhood. Memoir itself can be divided into multiple subgenres, such as confession, apology, and testimony (Couser, 9). Like autobiography, the memoir employs many of the

same narrative strategies and devices as the novel, which can make the boundary between fiction and nonfiction difficult to trace (Couser, 9). Nevertheless, autobiography and memoir position themselves as a non-fictional account of real human experiences, whereas the novel constructs its own lifelike reality (Couser, 15). Di Summa-Knoop identifies three defining features of the traditional memoir: an implicit pact of authentic self-disclosure that invites the reader's empathy, a coherent narrative structure that establishes causal connections and tends towards closure and emotional resolution, and the construction of meaningful connections between life events that enables deeper self-understanding and reflection on one's identity and moral agency (Thomas, 2019, 132-133). These characteristics are useful as they contrast with certain maternal narratives, which resist this expectation of coherence and emotional resolution (Thomas, 2019, 134), an aspect that I will return to in the following chapters.

Autofiction, by contrast, emerges in the space between these two positions. It derives from a trend in French literature and designates autobiographical fiction, or "fictional narrative in the first-person mode" (Smith et al., 186). The label was introduced in 1977 by the French writer and critic Serge Doubrovsky to name "fiction, of strictly real events and facts" (Gronemann, 241). Genre theorists have then concluded from Doubrovsky's model that any work subtitled 'novel' could be considered autofiction if it produces autobiographical referentiality (Gronemann, 241). The fact that the term has been used to describe writers such as Duras, Houellebecq, Dante, and Goethe, illustrates the challenge of giving it a clear definition. The term has now permeated everyday language and appears in a more general definition in dictionaries such as Le Robert: "Narrative in which fiction and autobiographical narrative are mingled (without going right to autobiography, or even to a fictionalized one)" (Le Robert in Gronemann, 241). It is applied to diverse literary works that interrogate the boundary between novelistic imagination and autobiographical truth, as well as between fiction and fact (Gronemann, 241). According to Gronemann, the concept of self is nowadays more fragile because of "the expansion of the techniques and media available for self-presentation, as well as in the oscillating boundaries between the reality of the subject and that of the media", allowing new concepts such as autofiction to arise (244).

Gronemann adds that autofiction has provided many authors with a means of engaging with the self that pushes beyond generic boundaries (245). In addition, Hywel Dix argues that autofiction allows for a greater degree of experimentation, partly because it is often "written in the aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience – real or imagined", with writing becoming a means of re-situating the self when familiar relational structures have been destabilized (Dix in Thomas, 2019, 131). In the case of exploring motherhood, autofiction may perform a similar function (Thomas, 2019, 131-132). If the "maternal encounter" is considered as "a form of everyday trauma" that disrupts the mother's sense of self – an aspect that will be developed in Chapter Five –, autofiction provides a space in which this disruption can be explored and the maternal subject reconfigured through writing (Thomas, 2019, 132).

A notable trend within contemporary autobiographical literature is the turn toward the “suffering body”, which “Leigh Gilmore describes as the “centrality of speaking pain’” (Savitt, 328). Savitt argues in her article that suffering may be the path for the writer to construct a public voice: “struggling makes one not just 'anybody' – it makes one a minority, an outsider” and gives them something to write about (329; 330; 331). However, some critics have warned against “encouraging an unproductive identity of victimhood” and against an expanded notion of trauma that could risk “delegitimizing the trauma of marginalized groups” (Britt et al., 921). Britt et al. therefore argue that feminist criticism needs to be careful about the misuse of trauma discourses that could ultimately reinforce patriarchal hierarchies (Britt et al., 928). The concept of suffering encloses both mental and physical wounds, but Savitt focuses on the suffering body and gives examples of autobiographies where the female body is a prison, locked by the domestic and maternal roles imposed on it (334). In the context of motherhood, the emphasis on suffering and the suffering body is particularly relevant, since maternal narratives often feature pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum depression, the demands of mothering and the societal pressure accompanying it, which leads to the next section on motherhood memoirs.

3.2. Motherhood memoirs

Within this broader rise of life writing, “the so-called motherhood memoir has exploded since the turn of the century” (Thomas, 2018, 72), and “motherhood [...] is a recurring theme in literature and life writing” (Fahlgren et al., 136), which highlights women’s role in contributing to the growth of life writing. In the first decade of the twenty-first century the motherhood memoir has gained recognition as a popular genre, with Anne Lamott’s *Operating Instructions: A Journal of My Son’s First Year* (1993) as “the first in a now well-established tradition” (Kawash, 985). According to Thomas, they have become key literary vehicles for a new wave of female writers engaging with motherhood (2018, 80).

The genre of the memoir, especially, has allowed women to challenge existing norms and stereotypes and to break taboo on crucial social issues (Jones, 2024, §3). That type of writing thus became a tool for self-expression, empowerment, and restoration of their voices (Jones, 2024, §2; §5). Women writers use their personal stories to delve into themes such as “identity, relationships, family dynamics, cultural and social expectations, gender roles, resilience, and personal growth” (Jones, 2024, §2). Jones also brings forward the fact that many female memoirists have played a crucial role in challenging the divide between the personal and the political, by interrogating how their individual experiences intersect with larger social realities (2024, §4). In that way, their narratives both offer a personal testimony and contribute to a wider dialogue (Jones, 2024, §4). In terms of content, motherhood memoirs often feature three key themes: the confrontation with myths of motherhood (Kawash, 985), gender inequality (Brown, 200-209), and the body (Brown, 204-206).

Regarding the first theme, motherhood memoirs function in their engagement with myths of motherhood as denunciation of the impossibility they constitute or as confessions

of being 'imperfect mothers' (Kawash, 985; Brown, 201). These memoirists highlight that mothering skills are acquired over time, not biologically given, which demystifies the ideal of the natural mother (Brown, 207). While many authors acknowledge the connection they have with their babies, they also describe the practical realities of early motherhood – being "isolated, exhausted, and left alone" – which contradict idealized cultural scripts (Brown, 207). At the same time, they react to a lack of honest representations of motherhood and position themselves as alternative narratives that broaden the understanding of that experience (Fahlgren et al., 136; Thomas, 2019, 21). Kawash reports in her article many feelings, such as anger and frustration, towards the high standards of idealized motherhood (985). This demonstrates how the confrontation with myths of motherhood is strongly tied to affect, which will be explored in the following chapter.

Alongside their demystification of maternal ideals, motherhood memoirs also foreground the structural dimensions of gender inequality that shape maternal experience (Brown, 203). They highlight how the demands of caregiving continue to fall disproportionately on women, revealing the persistence of traditional gender roles despite broader social changes (Brown, 203). Brown argues that the biological differences, which form the premise of gender inequality, are amplified during pregnancy and with maternity, and that they are "reaffirmed through social practices" (200; 203). However, while fighting against these inequalities, the authors also reinforce the conceptualization of gender in dichotomous terms by highlighting the differences in parental experiences, or for instance by seeing themselves as a more competent primary caregiver of the child than their partner (Brown, 203; 209). This categorical distinction, however, persists even among authors who identify as feminists who "grew up and became mothers during a time of increased gender equality", and is thus the result of biological essentialism that is intertwined and emphasized by social constructionism (Brown, 200; 209).

Thirdly, motherhood memoirs highlight the physical body as a central site through which maternity is experienced (Brown, 204). While some present the maternal body as a source of empowerment – because of its ability to produce a child –, many emphasize the social control over women's pregnant bodies (Brown, 205). The pregnant body also becomes physically visible, marking an intensified femininity that invites scrutiny (Brown, 205). Furthermore, this heightened body awareness also stems from the physical suffering and changes in the body coming with pregnancy and childbirth (Brown, 206). Physicality is thus a prominent theme in motherhood memoirs, functioning further as a basis for gender dichotomous categorization.

Regarding form, these maternal narratives are written from a first-person view and inherently from a female perspective (Brown, 203; 209). Furthermore, they are, according to Alex Zwerdling, "open-ended, not rule-bound, a flexible form without predictable terminus, rooted in the accidental record-keeping of diaries and correspondence, and in a life that shapes us rather than is ours to shape", and that freedom is what appeals to writers in search

of a medium for expressing personal experience (Thomas, 2018, 80). Motherhood memoirs are often fragmented, functioning as an imitation of the disruptiveness of their daily lives as mothers (Thomas, 2018, 80). Maternal time is indeed presented in these narratives as an altered temporality that diverges from a linear experience (Thomas, 2018, 71-72), a dimension that will be further explored in Chapter Five.

Despite their critical potential, motherhood memoirs remain constrained in several ways. For instance, while many expose motherhood as embedded within patriarchal structures, they rarely "ultimately denounce or transform this institution" (Thomas, 2019, 22). The responses they offer to this oppressive institution regularly remain individualized rather than structural, encouraging mothers to adapt their expectations towards unrealistic maternal standards and "just learn to give yourself a break" (Kawash, 985). Moreover, the image of motherhood that emerges from mainstream motherhood memoirs tends to be shaped by privilege, presupposing access to economic resources, leisure, and supportive partnerships, which limits the representativeness of these narratives (Kawash, 986). This is reinforced by a tendency towards essentialism, as – even though based on personal experiences – these authors "do not escape generalizations" about gender and parenthood (Brown, 210). Finally, motherhood memoirs are frequently restrained by their reception: often categorized as self-help or popular psychology, they are marginalized within literary and academic contexts and primarily addressed to a narrow audience of mothers, thereby limiting their critical reach (Thomas, 2019, 22).

Alongside motherhood memoirs, there has been in the last decade a growing body of counter-normative narratives by women who remain without children. Indeed, Spurling argues that there has been a "proliferation, since approximately 2010, of auto/biographies produced by non-parents; people who are leading a life without children whatever the reason." (837). These narratives offer alternative perspectives to cultural scripts that equate woman worth with motherhood (Fitzpatrick et al., 5-6). Spurling identifies within these autobiographical narratives the "memoir of becoming", such as Lisa Manterfield's *I'm Taking my eggs and Going Home* and Pamela Mahoney Tsigdinos' *Silent Sorority*, and the "memoir of transformation", such as Sheridan Voysey's *Resurrection Year* (842).

Memoirs of becoming recount the journey toward childlessness or a childfree life, frequently looking back to early experience to interrogate cultural expectations surrounding parenthood and family (Spurling, 842). They highlight how messages from childhood, healthcare institutions, and media shape this process, while capturing a range of feelings, medical encounters, and social responses involved (Spurling, 842). These works often explore societal reactions and strategies for navigating these pressures (Spurling, 842). They tend to end at the point of accepting or recognizing childlessness, and "may possibly hint at the values and possibilities of a different life, but without opening this up in anyway" (Spurling, 842). Memoirs of transformation, on the other hand, move beyond recounting the process of

becoming childless or childfree to focus on constructing a meaningful life afterward (Spurling, 842).

It is within this context of the growing prominence of life writing, and particularly of autofiction and motherhood memoirs, that writers like Sheila Heti and Rachel explore their experiences of maternal identity. Firstly, *A Life's Work*'s genre is not questioned as a memoir (Brown, 201) and presents indeed many characteristics of motherhood memoirs. It challenges idealized motherhood, addresses gender inequality and sees maternal experiences such as pregnancy and childbirth as "creating the gender difference" (Brown, 204). Physicality is a prominent feature, notably the suffering that comes with childbirth or with a "sense of loss of control" over the body (Brown, 206-207). *Motherhood*, on the contrary, blurs the boundaries between different genres. According to Fahlgren et al., "*Motherhood* has been labeled as a novel, but it is obviously a hybrid between novel, memoir, and autobiography" (138). *Motherhood* can be analyzed alongside *A Life's Work* as it presents many characteristics of motherhood memoirs: myths of motherhood, gender inequality, and the body are prominent themes, and the structure is highly fragmented. Besides, it can be situated within the trend of the "memoir of becoming", featuring the process towards childlessness. However, *Motherhood* is not a memoir, and Heti herself rejects classifying her book as such, instead situating it within "a tradition of novels in which nothing happens" (Heti et al., 168).

In this study, following what has been reviewed in the subgenres of life writing, *Motherhood* is classified as an autofiction novel. Firstly, it has been argued that the most novel-like characteristic of the book is the use of present-tense narration (Fahlgren et al., 138). Secondly, there are many similarities between the narrator and the author (Fahlgren et al., 139), such as the Jewish Hungarian heritage, the career as a writer, and the fact that both author and narrator are childless. Besides, Heti stated in an interview that *Motherhood* is implicitly a "novel from life", and that the reader is ultimately left to decide how to interpret the subtle tension between fictional construction and the author's lived reality (Heti et al., 148). She adds that writers have always been inspired by their own lives for their novels, though it is more explicitly expressed today (Heti et al., 148). However, it remains crucial to distinguish between the narrator and Heti, for she has not explicitly characterized her book as autobiographical.

3.3. Self-help Hermeneutics & Therapeutic Writing

The term “self-help” was first popularized in the nineteenth century with *Self Help* by Samuel Smiles (Heti in Blum, 1112). Since then, it has functioned as a “curatorial” practice that organizes existing forms of advice in order to facilitate personal transformation (Blum, 1100). Covering topics such as happiness, professional achievement, and love, self-help books are framed as tools for personal development that offer solutions to personal challenges (Nehring, 319). While offering advice, they simultaneously promote particular norms and assumptions about the social world (Nehring, 319). Indeed, according to Charlotte Linde, self-help follows a structure grounded in a system of shared beliefs which people use “to make events and evaluations coherent” (Smith et al., 202). Therefore, as Blum argues, “the cultural work self-help performs is fraught with political consequence” (1099).

While it constitutes a genre in itself, its influence extends far beyond it (Blum, 1100). As Blum argues, self-help has generated a broader interpretative mode, what she terms “self-help hermeneutics” (1100). She defines it as “the cross-cultural reading practice of expropriating textual insights for the purposes of self-betterment [...], whose reach can extend to texts not strictly considered part of the self-help canon” (1100). This hermeneutic framework reorients reading practices in a way that “subordinates the history and intention of the text to the reader’s current ambitions” (Blum, 1113). Literature, in this context, becomes a resource for self-optimization, emotional regulation, and personal decision-making.

Regarding motherhood, self-help has historically functioned as a site where culture “grapples with contemporary transformations in women’s roles and identities” (Miller in Blum, 1104), enabling women to “reconstitute the meaning of the female self” (Blum, 1103). However, self-help is on the other side frequently framed as a tool aimed at disciplining subjects and controlling populations, criticized as a means of systemic oppression or colonial domination (Blum, 1100). In the context of motherhood, this oppression can take the form of prescriptive models of maternal behavior and emotional fulfillment, trying to “mold mothers into ideal mothers” (Daubenmire, 6). Self-help is thus understood here not only as a genre but as a model that shapes how motherhood is expected to be felt and narrated (Daubenmire, 5).

Within this understanding of self-help as a framework that shapes how motherhood is imagined and experienced, parenting manuals constitute one of its most explicit examples. Emerging from a culture of expert advice, these texts have historically sought to respond to parental uncertainty and anxiety by providing guidance on child-rearing practices and maternal responsibilities (Daubenmire, 11). As Hulbert’s historical account of child-rearing manuals demonstrates, parenting advice has continuously evolved between two competing models: “child-centered” approaches that prioritize the child’s needs and development and “parent-centered” approaches that emphasize parental authority and autonomy (Daubenmire, 10). Although these approaches differ in their understanding of children and

parental roles, both contribute to the construction of ideals of motherhood by defining what a mother ought to do and how she should respond emotionally and practically to her child (Daubenmire, 10). Therefore, while parenting manuals can provide support, they also participate in the production of normative frameworks that encourage mothers to evaluate their behavior against culturally constructed models of "good" parenting (Daubenmire, 11).

Alongside these prescriptive models of motherhood, a parallel body of self-help literature has emerged addressing the experience of not having children, whether by circumstance or by choice. While these texts share the broader self-help claim of assisting individuals in interpreting and managing personal experiences, a reading of this body of literature suggests that they do not address childlessness in a uniform way, but in three recurring orientations. First, some texts adopt a therapeutic approach that seek to help women process grief and reconstruct meaning in the context of involuntary childlessness, such as Jody Day's *Living the Life Unexpected* (Spurling, 842). Second, other works move away from narratives of loss and present childfree life as a legitimate, empowering, and fulfilling choice, with for example Blackstone's *Childfree by choice*. Finally, a third group of self-help books addresses women who experience uncertainty or ambivalence regarding motherhood, such as *Motherhood. Is It For Me?* by Carlini and Davidman. Despite their differences, these strands participate in a shared self-help logic of self-improvement (Latham et al., 5) and transformation of thoughts and feelings (Riley et al., 6), inviting women to construct coherent life narratives in relation to dominant cultural expectations of motherhood.

Maternal narratives, and in particular motherhood memoirs and memoirs on childlessness for their authenticity, are situated in this practice of self-help hermeneutics in the way that they both invite and complicate self-help modes of reading. As previously discussed, these narratives often emerge from a perceived lack of realistic representations of motherhood and position themselves as corrective texts that offer insight into (non-)maternal experience (Thomas, 2019, 21). In doing so, they encourage readers to engage with them as practical resources for understanding and navigating their own (non-)maternal experiences. At the same time, they criticize the normative and oppressive expectations present in certain examples of self-help literature, such as parental manuals. This ambivalent positioning – simultaneously participating in and resisting self-help hermeneutics – will be central to the analysis. Chapters Seven and Eight will demonstrate how *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* challenge this framework, both through affect and narrative form, by exposing the limits of self-help's promise of improvement and resolution as well as its normative dimension (Latham et al., 5; 11; 14).

While self-help hermeneutics refer to a mode of reading oriented towards extracting meaning and guidance from texts (Blum, 1100), therapeutic writing deals with a mode of writing that frames personal narratives as a form of emotional processing (Pascuzzi et al., 28; Gladding et al., 1). Also called scriptotherapy (Smith et al., 22; Gladding et al., 1), the concept of therapeutic writing assumes that the articulation of lived experiences has a cathartic effect

on the author, especially when writing about “emotionally charged memories” (DaPra, 63). It has been shown to bring self-disclosure, healing, even leading to a form of empowerment (Bauer, 213). Several scholars also highlighted the role figurative language holds in this healing process: it helps “liberate the unconscious” (Brauer, 217) and metaphors specifically have the power to “facilitate self-awareness and cognitive reframing of a problem” (Gladding et al., 8). The writing process brings clarity, making the writer themselves and their world clearer (DaPra, 64; Gladding, 10).

Therapeutic writing is thus closely linked to affect, as personal narratives are not neutral reflections of reality but personally reconstructed accounts that necessarily entail emotions (Pascuzzi et al., 32). It is often associated with the expression and working-through of difficult emotional states such as shame, anxiety, ambivalence, depression, or trauma. (Bauer, 213; Gladding et al., 1). Gladding et al. argue that scriptotherapy can be used to deal with “the resolution of life difficulties, especially those that are unnoticed, denied, unresolved, or traumatic”, leading to a “cathartic release of repressed emotions” (1; 6). Beyond self-expression, writing also functions as a practice of emotional regulation and acceptance (Gladding et al., 1; Pascuzzi et al., 28).

Rather than constituting a separate framework, therapeutic writing thus operates as an interpretive assumption within life writing, according to which autobiographical narration can serve to process traumatic memories and facilitate healing (Smith et al., 22). However, individuals’ memories of emotional events are shaped by cultural beliefs, leading them to reconstruct the past in ways that align with the norms of their society (Pascuzzi et al., 31). Because of the myths of motherhood, women are therefore influenced by the emotions they are supposed to feel in their reconstruction of maternal narratives.

In the context of motherhood, this framework thus contributes to the broader cultural expectation of the myth of maternal happiness by presupposing that maternal difficulty can be processed into understanding, and ultimately into emotional balance or fulfilment. Maternal narratives are indeed often situated within this broader cultural expectation of writing as a form of coping and are frequently characterized by an attempt to engage with the difficulties of motherhood or reproductive choice with as much honesty and authenticity as possible (Hamm, 157). Considering both self-help and therapeutic writing frameworks foreground the expectation that affect can be worked through (Riley et al., 6; Pascuzzi et al., 28), the following chapter turns to affect itself.

Chapter 4 - Affect & the Maternal Killjoy

While the previous chapters established the contemporary and theoretical frameworks within which maternal life writing is produced and read, this chapter develops the first of the two interconnected concepts through which I examine how *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* challenge dominant myths of motherhood: affect. Chapter One explained the contemporary changes and tensions in reproductive choice and family norms, while Chapter Two demonstrated that the persistence of myths of motherhood, notably through the "tradwife", are sustained through hegemonic expectations concerning what motherhood should be and how it should be experienced. Chapter Three described the rise of maternal narratives in life writing, and especially motherhood memoirs, which emerge as resistance to the idealized scripts described in Chapter Two, and the rise of self-help and therapeutic culture which offer tools to help mothers while at the same time sustaining certain expectations. Affect provides a means of examining what happens when maternal experience does not conform to these expectations. It will be then connected with narrative form in the next chapter, asking how affect is represented formally.

This chapter focuses specifically on the role of affect in the destabilization of hegemonic cultural scripts on motherhood, arguing that marginalized affects play a crucial role in exposing and unsettling the motherhood mystique. The chapter begins by outlining key debates surrounding the distinction between emotion and affect. It then turns to Sianne Ngai's concept of "ugly feelings" to understand minor and often devalued affects. Building on this, it engages with Sara Ahmed's work on happiness to examine how such affects can function as forms of resistance to dominant ideals, notably through the figure of the "maternal killjoy". Finally, the chapter situates these theoretical insights within the context of maternal narratives by identifying a set of recurring affects that reveal and contest the cultural expectations attached to motherhood.

4.1. Emotions & Affect, an Endless Debate

Since the 1990s, the so-called "affective turn" has reshaped critical approaches across the humanities and social sciences, emerging as part of a broader "surge of interest in emotions" (Ahern, 96; Hogan et al., 1). Often referred to as "affect theory" or "affect studies", this body of work has notably been concerned with the distinction between "emotion" and "affect". However, no clear definition of either term exists, and their meanings vary across different theoretical frameworks (Ahern, 101; Hogan et al., 2). In some cases, the terms are even used as synonyms, resulting in the inclusion of a wide range of work dealing with emotion and feeling under the umbrella of "affect theory", "affect studies", or "affective turn" (Hogan et al., 2).

Rather than attempting to resolve the conceptual debates and establish fixed definitions, I will use the term "affects" in this thesis as a global term that encompasses emotions, feelings, and ugly feelings. It follows Sara Ahmed's logic who adopts the noun

"affect" in the broad sense of "to be affected by something" (21). While the goal of some studies – such as Massumi's – is to attempt to obtain a clear definition of "emotion" and "affect", the aim of this thesis is to grasp how the complexity of human mental states is articulated into language and narrative to demystify maternal happiness and absolute fulfillment. In this respect, strict categorization is not necessary and would even fail to reveal this complexity. However, this chapter draws on multiple theoretical perspectives – Massumi, Ngai, and Larivey –, to show how the distinction between different terms brings useful insights.

In Brian Massumi's work – one of the precursors and foundational figure of affect studies (Ahern, 96; 99) –, the distinction between affect and emotion is that "the first [refers to] a phenomenon that is "prepersonal" and eludes cognition, while the second [refers to] something that is brought into the personal as a result of "the capture and closure of affect"" (Ahern, 99). Affect is understood as a preconscious, pre-linguistic ("asignifying protosensation") and fleeting intensity, rooted in bodily processes and operating outside of self-control (Ahern, 101; 102). Emotion, by contrast, is theorized as a wider phenomenon (Hogan et al., 2), referring to the social and linguistic articulation of such intensities (Hogan et al., 3), something that is personally felt and registered (Arthur, 4). While affects are thus associated with indeterminacy, emotions are culturally constructed and tend to imply a certain degree of recognition and clear linguistic articulation (Hogan et al., 3).

This distinction is interesting in the case of motherhood, where hegemonic cultural narratives present a narrow range of stable and legible emotions – mostly happiness, fulfillment and love – as natural and universal features of maternal experience (Lewis, 38). As a result, within the stereotypes that continue to shape understandings of motherhood in the twenty-first century, only certain feelings are socially legitimized, while others – such as ambivalence and guilt – are stigmatized, or even pathologized, and viewed as a failure (Lewis, 38). These normative emotions thus function as ideals that shape expectations of what motherhood should feel like. By contrast, it is argued that the texts examined in this study present affects that resist such uniformity. Rather than presenting clearly defined and socially imposed emotions, these books evoke ambivalent, confusing, and unstable affects that unsettle the harmony of maternal happiness. As Eugenie Brinkema suggests, affect in the case of literary studies must also be approached as question of "structure, form, and aesthetics" (Brinkema in Ahern, 103). Affective experiences emerge thus not only in what the words express semantically, but also in structure and stylistic choices. This aspect of form, central in this thesis, will thus be connected to affect in Chapter Five on narrative form.

While Massumi emphasizes the preconscious and prelinguistic nature of affect, Sianne Ngai's concept of "ugly feelings" complicates any strict division between affect and emotion. Ngai uses terms such as "feelings" and "affects" interchangeably to describe affective states that are interpretive and socially embedded (Ngai, 3). The "ugly feelings" she examines – such as irritation, envy, or anxiety – would conventionally be classified by Massumi as emotions,

yet they occupy a hybrid position in that they possess the indeterminacy often associated with affect. Yet, they do not conform to a classical, Aristotelian model of emotion characterized by suddenness, intensity, and cathartic resolution. Indeed, Ngai's "ugly feelings" designate a set of low intensity, non-cathartic, and "amoral" affects that are characterized by a certain flatness and ongoingness (Ngai, 6-7), which is exactly where self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing are resisted. Indeed, these therapeutical frameworks construct affects as modifiable and resolvable (Riley, 6), where actions such as writing lead to self-understanding and catharsis release (Latham et al., 5; Gladding et al., 6). However, these "ugly feelings" tend to obstruct action and interfere with the development or release of other emotions, thereby resisting narrative closure and emotional legibility (Ngai, 6; 7). Furthermore, these feelings are not purely internal or pre-social; Ngai studies them as interpretations of sociohistorical predicaments, often emerging in contexts of restricted agency, and therefore "charged with political significance" (Ngai, 3). These feelings can therefore be investigated in a specifical cultural context where they are prominent or repressed (Ngai, 7), here in the context of motherhood.

Larivey offers a third set of observations about affect that are relevant here, namely in her book on the power of emotions where she distinguishes between "emotions" and "feelings". She refers to "emotion" as an intense, temporary inner reaction accompanied by more or less numerous and strong physical reactions, such as anger, happiness, and fear (Larivey, 18). The emotion rises and sometimes invades the individual (Larivey, 18). On the contrary, "feelings" are defined as more diffuse, longer-lasting emotional occurrences, such as tenderness and bitterness (Larivey, 18). Unlike emotions, they are not accompanied by strong physical sensations and settle more discreetly (Larivey, 18). Although she differentiates between "emotion" and "feeling" at the beginning of her book, Larivey still uses these terms interchangeably afterwards. She argues that emotions and feelings are complex and multidimensional, often fulfilling an identical function in the body and therefore hard to categorize in real life (Larivey, 18-19). Furthermore, an emotional experience – in the broad sense including "emotion" and "feeling" – can sometimes bring together multiple sensations or be a set of emotions and emotional occurrences that can hardly be singled out (Larivey, 18-19).

Read together, these debates surrounding terminology bring different perspectives which provide useful insights and nuances for the analysis. First, certain affects are culturally defined, named, and legitimized, while others remain obscured or even stigmatized (Lewis, 32). In the case of motherhood, socially defined emotions – such as happiness or anger – are used by patriarchy to impose on women what is acceptable, while non-conventional affects – such as frustration and disgust – are marginalized (Lewis, 38; Ahmed, 32; 51), echoing Ngai's "ugly feelings". Second, some affective experiences are so fleeting or vague that they become hardly recognizable (Larivey, 18-19), mixing what some would name "emotions" and others "affects". Third, these "minor feelings" resist the expectation of catharsis and resolution (Ngai, 6-7), thereby challenging both patriarchal norms and the logic of self-help

hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. By labelling these affects as “minor” or “ugly”, it also exposes the unpleasant sides of motherhood that dominant cultural narratives make invisible.

4.2. Ugly Feelings & Ambivalent Affects

Building on this framework, this section turns to Sianne Ngai’s conceptualization of “ugly feelings” as a way to interpret the affects that are prominent in *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work*. Indeed, this study argues that both case studies are predominantly characterized by low-intensity, lingering minor negative feelings, even as moments of heightened affect occasionally surface. The focus here is on aspects of her work that are most relevant for understanding affective experiences that resist clarity and resolution – characteristics that are central to normative representations of maternal happiness.

While Ngai identifies a specific set of “ugly feelings”, her analysis does not aim to establish an exhaustive list, providing instead a conceptual framework that can be extended to other affects sharing similar properties. Drawing on her framework and on Larivey’s analysis of everyday emotions, this study proposes to organize the affective experiences represented in Cusk’s and Heti’s narratives into three analytical groups: 1) restless affects, including irritation, frustration, and anxiety, 2) affective flatness, such as detachment, and 3) inhibiting affects, such as shame, guilt, and envy. Across these categories, ambivalence operates as a central dynamic, with affects coexisting, overlapping, and oscillating to create a conflicted emotional experience. This section therefore establishes a theoretical framework that will later be used to analyze how such affective states emerge and function in *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work*.

The first affective state, characterized by its restlessness, gathers the affects of irritation, frustration, and anxiety. While the portrayal of some of these affects in *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work* may exceed the feature of “low intensity” in Ngai’s definition, they share a lack of clear object. Irritation, for instance, is characterized by the absence of a clearly identifiable object or cause, often appearing as an affect driven by a “quest” to assign an object and thereby producing a sense of ongoing dissatisfaction without clear resolution (Ngai, 179-180). This indeterminacy is reinforced by its status as a minor affect which seems politically ineffective, lacking the intensity of anger and often dismissed as superficial or inadequate (Ngai, 181-183).

Similarly, anxiety can be understood as a diffuse, anticipatory form of fear, oriented toward an uncertain future rather than toward a clearly defined threat (Ngai, 209-210; Larivey, 165). Its vagueness makes it difficult to address, often rendering resolution impossible, while its temporal structure, marked by expectation, anchors it in a state of unresolved anticipation (Ngai, 209-210; Larivey, 165). Finally, frustration emerges from a perceived mismatch between expectation and lived reality, often linked to situations experienced as unjust and beyond individual control (Larivey, 280-281). Unlike more momentary affects, frustration can become cumulative: when experienced repeatedly, it

produces a persistent state of dissatisfaction (Larivey, 280). In the case of motherhood, frustration is frequently expressed “at having to confront the script of motherhood-as-fulfillment" (Hummer, 1105).

The second grouping, affective flatness, designates states marked by emotional flatness, including exhaustion and emptiness. Emotional exhaustion often emerges after an intense emotional experience, or from the effort of blocking the rise of intense emotions (Larivey, 182). Similarly, emptiness comes from the repression of present emotions and can be momentary or lasting (Larivey, 223). Closely aligned with Ngai’s emphasis on low-intensity affect, they sustain a sense of suspension in which affect is neither fully absent nor fully expressed. Because of their repression of (intense) emotions (Larivey, 223), they prevent catharsis from occurring.

Thirdly, inhibiting affects, including shame, guilt, and envy, share the connection with self-esteem and the tendency to restrain action. Envy, as Ngai argues, emerges as a response to perceived inequality in social relations, “inclusive of, but not limited to patriarchal ideology” (Ngai, 127). While it is often viewed as petty, Ngai draws on Rey Chow to emphasize that it signals a condition of “not having” that is structurally produced (Ngai, 127-128). As a feeling which explicitly has “inequality as its object”, envy has the potential to function as a critical tool, recognizing and responding to this inequality (Ngai, 128). However, despite its critical potential, envy is culturally stigmatized, particularly in relation to femininity, turning it into an egocentric and shameful condition (Ngai, 129). As a result, envy becomes both a stigmatized feeling and a form of “unhappy self-assertion" that, while devalued, retains the capacity to interrogate gender norms and expose the inequalities that structure female experience (Ngai, 130).

Guilt, in Larivey’s account, arises when an individual has acted against their own values, producing a form of self-directed anger and regret regarding past actions, or functions as a mechanism whereby individuals reshape or silence their experiences to render them more acceptable to others or even to themselves (113-115). Guilt often covers several other affects – such as frustration of having to put up with something or fear of being judged –, thus operating as a regulatory mechanism that obscures rather than clarifies emotional experience (Larivey, 115). Finally, shame is the social version of guilt: it is an affect that is felt in front of others, caused by their imagined or real judgment (Larivey, 127). It arises when one is seen in an aspect of themselves that they judge negatively (Larivey, 127). Shame is produced through culturally constructed norms that define acceptable forms of identity and behavior (Johnson et al., 1165). In relation to motherhood, Ahmed argues that it functions as a mechanism of social regulation by monitoring those who fail to conform to dominant ideals of motherhood (Johnson et al., 1165). Because of this regulatory function, shame can limit the expression of alternative maternal feelings, as the fear of social condemnation encourages women to conceal experiences that contradict idealizes narratives of motherhood (Johnson et al., 1166).

Across these affective states, ambivalence emerges as a central condition. It refers to the co-existence or oscillation between opposed affects or attitudes (Larivey 238), resulting in “feeling conflicted and undecided” (Durso et al., 1). While ambivalence may be experienced as an unpleasant experience, especially when it becomes overwhelming and leads to emotional paralysis or an inability to act (Larivey, 238-239; Durso et al., 2), it does not necessarily constitute a negative affect in itself. Rather, its significance depends on the context in which it emerges and the meanings attached to it. Historically, ambivalence has been framed as a flaw, signaling personal weakness associated with confusion, passivity, or even lack of moral clarity (Coccia, 779). However, in their essay, Coccia et al. reframe ambivalence as an affective state capable of revealing traces of contradictions within oppressive discourses (779). In the context of motherhood, ambivalence can therefore be understood not only as an experience of uncertainty, but also as an affect that makes visible the incompatibilities between idealized maternal expectations and lived experience.

Altogether, these affective states – whether restless, flattened, or inhibiting – share a resistance to catharsis. Moreover, they often blur the boundaries between the individual and the social, as they emerge from and at the same time signal broader structures of inequality and normativity (Ngai, 3). Therefore, they do not simply describe private emotional experiences but register tensions between lived experience and socially prescribed forms of feeling, making them particularly relevant for examining maternal contexts in which emotional life is heavily idealized. These affects also seem to overlap with each other and therefore sometimes obscure one another, which complicates emotional clarity and resolution.

4.3. Unhappiness & The Maternal Killjoy

The expression of ugly feelings can be understood as a refusal of what Sara Ahmed terms "the promise of happiness” (1). By examining how happiness is socially constructed, this section reflects on the political conditions from which the unhappy mother and the maternal killjoy appear. It first considers the link with self-help and therapeutic culture, before turning to the normative function of happiness. It then addresses the negative affects and the maternal killjoy that emerge in response to this promise.

Studies on happiness are part of a “happiness turn”, closely linked to the “popularity of therapeutic cultures and self-help discourses” discussed in Chapter Three, with a lot of books and lectures offering advice on how to be happy (Ahmed, 3). Hence, this gave rise to a “happiness industry”, where “happiness is both produced and consumed through these books” (Ahmed, 3). Within this framework, happiness is understood not only as a feeling or a reflective judgment on life but as a social imperative (Ahmed, 21). Sara Ahmed conceptualizes it as a social norm orienting individuals towards specific experiences, people, things, and life trajectories, which she globally calls “happy objects” (Ahmed, 2; 21). Marriage, family, and parenting, for instance, are presented as the primary "happy objects" that are presumed to guarantee a good life (Ahmed, 6; 45; 52). By getting the “right associations” – that is by

following the culturally prescribed objects –, individuals are promised to find happiness (Ahmed, 2). These objects function thus as ideals to reach and are not neutral; they are already imbued with positive value “before they are even encountered”, creating the expectation that proximity to them will produce happiness (Ahmed, 11; 27; 28; 34). Happiness becomes thus less a matter of personal experience than of alignment with normative ideals (Ahmed, 32). Finally, being positively affected by objects deemed good is a way of aligning oneself with an affective community (Ahmed, 38). In the context of motherhood, for instance, this affective community is composed of mothers who are naturally fulfilled and happy by their mother role.

However, this promise of happiness functions in fact as a tool to justify oppression (Ahmed, 2). The figure of the “happy housewife”, for instance – and by extension of the “happy mother” – operates as a fantasy that obscures the labor she performs by framing it as happiness (Ahmed, 50). This ideal persists in the recent years in the figure of the “tradwife” explored in Chapter One, which similarly presents domestic and maternal labor as a source of happiness and fulfillment (Proctor, 7). The idea that women’s domestic work is driven by happiness functions to validate gendered labor as an expression of “collective wish and desire” rather than obligations enforced by social norms (Ahmed, 50). In doing so, the promise of happiness becomes an instrument which orients "individual desire toward a common good” (Ahmed, 59). Failure to find happiness in these prescribed roles is not understood as a problem of the norm itself, but as a personal deficiency (Ahmed, 7). Any deviation from the gender roles that position women as responsible for men’s happiness is cast as undermining the happiness of society as a whole (Ahmed, 55). Social scripts thereby convey the idea that women who do not wish to have children or mothers who are not happy in their mother role impact the happiness of those around them and are portrayed as personal failures.

When happiness fails to appear as promised, negative affects – including ugly feelings – emerge. When individuals are “affectively alien” to the presumed happy objects, they feel alienated from the world and “out of line” with the affective community (Ahmed, 11; 41; 67). Therefore, when happy objects are encountered, it is not always the feeling of happiness itself that is transmitted, but often only the promise, which can create a gap between expectation and lived experience. This gap produces disappointment and self-doubt, as individuals internalize the failure to feel as they “should”, or anger directed toward the objects that fail to deliver their promise (Ahmed, 41; 42; 44). An obstacle to happiness is conceptualized by Ahmed as an “unhappy object” and can also refer to something that is missing (32). Unhappiness can also reflect a sense of restriction or frustration at being unable to pursue what one desires (Ahmed, 51). Such affective responses are particularly relevant to the discussion developed in the previous section, where “ugly feelings” are politically charged and emerge in a context of inequality or oppression. Furthermore, Ahmed argues that such responses reveal that attachments to the notion of “good life” are frequently marked by ambivalence, involving an overlap and confusion of positive and negative affects rather than a clear and coherent distinction (6).

It is with these negative affects in response to a normative and oppressive promise of happiness that the “feminist killjoy” emerges (Ahmed, 17). Rather than interpreting negative affects as a personal failure, Ahmed suggests that such “negativity” can be reread as a challenge to the assumption that happiness naturally follows the proximity to “happy objects” (53). The feminist killjoy is thus figured as a disruptive subject: one who refuses to claim the prescribed objects and scripts as providing happiness and who, in doing so, is often perceived as the source of discomfort or conflict (Ahmed, 65; 69). She “spoils” the happiness of others not by producing unhappiness per se, but by exposing how happiness is sustained through the silencing of dissatisfaction and the concealment of structural inequalities (Ahmed, 65; 66). Feminist critique, for Ahmed, entails a refusal to “adjust” to a world already shaped by such norms, and a heightened awareness of what women are asked to sacrifice in order to inhabit the promise of happiness (70; 79). This refusal does not necessarily result in a complete rejection of happiness, but rather in a reorientation: the freedom to be affected differently (Ahmed, 27). In the case of motherhood, this “feminist killjoy” can thus be conceptualized as a “maternal killjoy”: a figure who does not reject motherhood itself, but who challenges the narrow conception of maternal happiness that restricts the range of affects considered legitimate within idealized motherhood.

The presence of such affects is particularly visible in contemporary maternal narratives, where a growing body of writing challenges the idealization of motherhood by foregrounding ambivalence, frustration, and dissatisfaction. As Brown’s analysis of early motherhood memoirs published between 2001 and 2003 demonstrates, while these narratives register moments of positive affect, they frequently emphasize the pressure to conform to dominant myths of motherhood (207). As Kawash observes, many mothers resist the expectation to feel guilty about so-called “nonmaternal feelings” and “refuse to pathologize their own frustration”, instead articulating anger toward the high and impossible standards that structure maternal experience (985). Similarly, studies of motherhood memoirs highlight how such texts present motherhood not as a natural or instinctive condition but as overwhelming and disorienting (Brown, 201; 207). Furthermore, these mothers feel “conflicted towards their children” and express unhappiness regarding their social position as new mothers (Brown, 207). Although these texts resist normative expectations, the prominent ambivalent feelings sometimes remain “inadmissible to others” (Brown, 207), revealing the persisting guilt and the weight of social disapprobation regarding non-normative affects.

While this chapter has established how non-normative affects can challenge dominant ideals of motherhood, this study also focuses on how affect does not only appear as a thematic content but is also shaped and intensified through specific narrative strategies. To understand how *A Life’s Work* and *Motherhood* destabilize maternal myths, this study now turns to questions of form. Narrative voice, fragmentation, repetition, and temporal disjunction, among other techniques, structure how affect is experienced and articulated.

Chapter Five thus examines how narrative form works together with affect to unsettle hegemonic representations of motherhood.

Chapter 5 - Narratology in Maternal Narratives

After the theoretical chapter on affect, the present chapter develops the second of the two interconnected concepts used to analyze *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood*: narrative form. This chapter argues that form is used as an instrument to reflect affect, thereby connecting Chapter Four and Chapter Five. Recent scholarship on motherhood, such as Thomas's work, has examined questions of temporality and subjectivity – which are central to the discussion on affect and form –, mentioning Heti and Cusk. However, she addresses the two authors in separate sections in relation to different topics, without comparing them; Cusk has the bodily experience of pregnancy, childbirth and early motherhood (Thomas, 2019, 30; 39; 90) that Heti's narrator never experiences, and *Motherhood* constitutes a "return narrative" going back to the mother-daughter relationship (Thomas, 2019, 55). She also focuses on the personal and interior experiences of mothers rather than framing the texts in relation to the myths of motherhood.

This thesis therefore builds on such work to understand conceptual frameworks related to temporality, but shifts the focus to a comparative analysis of Cusk's and Heti's maternal narratives on specifically how affect and form are combined to challenge the myths of motherhood. Furthermore, while Thomas' work aims to analyze different temporalities and how it relates to maternal subjectivity, this study focuses on how a fragmented subjectivity and altered temporality resists the coherence and healing associated with self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. After an introduction on feminist narratology, this chapter addresses fragmentation as a reflect of inner struggle and as a site of resistance (Musayeva, 61; Zhang et al., 5), both reflecting the refusal of resolution. It then delves into different altered temporalities: women's temporality, the temporality of women postponing or rejecting motherhood, and maternal temporalities, connecting them with narrative form and affect.

Narratology refers to the study of the structure of narratives (Gymnich, 705). Feminist narratology, established in the 1980s by Susan Lanser, is grounded in the assumption that gender plays a significant role in shaping narrative structures (Gymnich, 705). However, Page informs on the reductive issues of such binary model of gender difference, suggesting that a performative approach taking into account the "multiple and shifting nature of gender" – moving thus from 'feminist narratology' to 'gender narratology' – would be more appropriate to analyze narrative structures (53).

A clear example of differences in narratives on the basis of gender is Peter Brook's division between "the male plot ambition" and "the female plot of endurance" (Page, 45). Women's plots are often defined as "nonlinear, repetitive, resistant to closure, structured around multiple endpoints or stasis", in contrast to the teleological, action- and progression-driven structure attributed to male plots (Page, 45). Furthermore, the theorists Cixous and Kristeva argue that women's particular relation to language is fundamentally connected to

bodily experience, with cyclical references to temporality (Page, 50). These different elements will be further developed in the sections underneath, leading to a detailed comprehension of the common characteristics of narrative form in maternal narratives.

5.1. Fragmentation & Narrative Coherence

Fragmentation is a term used loosely in literary studies, ranging from the experimental and avant-garde construction of texts composed of fragments (Callahan, 9) to descriptions of incoherent structures marked by disjointed syntax (Zhang et al., 3; ul Huda et al., 533). In the context of contemporary feminist life writings such as *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood*, fragmentation can be more precisely understood as the disruption of narrative continuity through the juxtaposition of reflections or scenes that are not fully integrated into a coherent, teleological progression. This understanding builds on Terala et al.'s analysis of fragmentation as "placing gaps, contradictions, and self-reflexive intrusions", as well as "interruptions, shifts and discontinuities" (8616). Although Terala et al.'s article focuses on twentieth-century literature and presents fragmentation partly as a response to historical trauma such as the World Wars, they acknowledge that this narrative technique appears across diverse periods and contexts, including feminist and postcolonial writing (8615; 8616). Their understanding of fragmentation can therefore be extended to maternal narratives. While fragmentation and its features have been associated with postmodern writing (Rezaei, 17), the aim here is not to situate *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* within a specific literary movement, but to examine how these formal strategies function in the context of maternal experience.

Building on this understanding, gender narratology emphasizes that "a new form of language is necessary to represent the female experience" (Callahan, 10). Fragmentation thus functions as a formal strategy that disrupts linear and coherent modes of writing traditionally associated with patriarchal representations of reality, enabling women to represent more accurately their female – and in this case their maternal – embodied experiences (Callahan, 9-10; Zhang et al., 5). Fragmentation therefore does not only denote formal experimentation but reflects the "disorganized nature" of the writer's thoughts and their disrupted identity, revealing a search for meaning that unfolds through form itself (Terala et al., 8615). This also entails a blurring of the boundary between life and writing, as postmodernists believe that art is "a part of reality and experience" (Rezaei, 17).

In the specific context of motherhood, this formal disruption becomes a means of articulating maternal subjectivity (Thomas, 2019, 114). A fragmented narrative form can express what has been described as a subjectivity that is "fluid, fragmented, and ambiguous" (Thomas, 2019, 128). This instability can also be understood as a broader identity crisis and a "struggle for legitimization" (Rezaei, 16), in which the maternal subject struggles to reconcile competing roles – such as work and childcare – (Jarvis et al., 32) and to validate affects which fall outside dominant cultural norms (Lewis, 38). Thomas further identifies a "doubled subjectivity", emerging both from the tension between a woman's former self and her new identity as a mother, and from ambivalent feelings that often characterizes early motherhood

(2019, 119). This tension becomes “tangible to the reader” through a form that is “full of openings and questions, yet necessarily succinct and direct” (Thomas, 2019, 114; 121). When mothers experience affective states that are not “suitable maternal emotions”, they may feel further alienated from the maternal role, intensifying their already complex and unstable subjectivity (Thomas, 2019, 100). In relation to dominant myths of motherhood, the fragmented form thus enables the expression of the tension between myth and reality, as well as the confusion and disorientation it creates. However, as Musayeva argues, this “crisis of the [...] self” does not necessarily function as a purely destructive force, but can instead become a space of creative transformation, in which female identity is defined by “continuous renewal and self-transcendence, rather than stability” (61).

This fragmentation can also manifest through formal features such as repetition and circularity, which reflect the difficulty of resolving conflicting emotions or thoughts. These features can be seen as attempts to articulate what remains resistant to coherent expression and never reaches a conclusion, a “continual effort to express something ultimately inexpressible” (Johnson, 38). In this sense, “emotional fragmentation becomes the main way of expressing female experience”, as “immediate emotions” and “inner shocks” take precedence over external events (Musayeva, 63). Johnson connects this with the maternal experience of being haunted by a wide range of new and often negative feelings, such as guilt (38), which resist resolution. More broadly, such formal strategies foreground a sense of indeterminacy, as affective responses remain unstable and shifting (Rezaei, 17). In the context of motherhood, this often relates to the persistence of complex and sometimes negative affects which resist resolution (Thomas, 2019, 49; 134). However, repetition does not exclusively signal distress or “haunting” (Callahan, 12). As Callahan notes, it can also produce a form of recognition and even pleasure: “the pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations [...], relearn the same emotional truths” (12). At the level of syntax, this effect becomes even more pronounced: as Ngai argues, the repetition of particular words or sentences, often embedded within long and complex sentences, can generate a sense of frustration from a blocked response (250; 252), reflecting an inability to fully process or articulate experience, and a struggle of dealing with ambivalent feelings that are typical of maternal experience (Johnson, 38; Thomas, 2019, 89). These formal features thus reinforce the representation of maternal subjectivity as marked by inner conflict (Musayeva, 63).

Besides its representational function, fragmentation also functions as a tool of resistance against patriarchy (Zhang et al., 5). While it reflects the inner struggles of maternal experience, it simultaneously challenges the formal and ideological norms associated with patriarchal discourse (Zhang et al., 5). In Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for instance, the “later fragmented assertions [...] signal a defiant break from that control, with abrupt shifts and exclamatory tone disrupting the coherence of patriarchal restraint” (Zhang et al., 4-5). Zhang et al. thus argue that a “disjointed style” and “visionary chaos” function to destabilize masculine norms (19). In the context of motherhood, this extends to the disruption

of dominant myths of motherhood that construct maternal identity as naturally and inherently fulfilling (Lewis, 35). By embracing instability, contradiction, and narrative chaos, women assert their agency, presenting identity "not as a finished product, but as an ongoing process of self-making, shaped by history, trauma, culture, and resistance" (ul Huda et al., 534). Similarly, Musayeva argues that freedom in women's writing is not a fixed achievement but an ongoing effort to define the self "within the boundaries constantly reproduced by patriarchal structures" (65).

These two functions of fragmentation – as a representation of unstable subjectivity and as a form of resistance (Musayeva, 61; Zhang et al., 5), – both expose the limits of self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. Such discourses typically rely on transformation and resolution, framing experience as something that can be understood, processed, and ultimately overcome (Latham et al., 5; Riley et al., 5-6; Woodstock, 336). Fragmented narratives, however, resist this logic. Because of their rejection of linear development and closure (Zhang et al., 4-5), they challenge the therapeutic imperative to make sense of experience and the expectation to find resolution and healing from writing (Pascuzzi et al., 32). By extension, fragmented narratives compromise the expectation that maternal experience can be constructed into a coherent story of growth or recovery. Moreover, fragmentation also affects the representation of time (Callahan, 10; 13), leading to the next section on maternal temporalities.

5.2. Motherhood Temporalities

Maternal narratives frequently disrupt conventional representations of time as linear, progressive, and goal-oriented (Johnson, 32). Instead, they construct temporalities that are marked by repetition (Johnson, 38), circularity (Chodorow, 1189), and interruption (Thomas, 2019, 27). These alternate temporal structures are closely tied to the narrative form, shaping the organization of the text through non-linear progression (Thomas, 2019, 89) and fragmentation (Thomas, 2019, 89). These temporalities are also affectively charged, for instance by exhaustion (Thomas, 2019, 89). In this way, temporality becomes a site where affect and form overlap, challenging the forward movement and coherence typically associated with self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. The following paragraphs explore these altered maternal temporalities, focusing on their embodied, social, and affective dimensions, and how they are formally articulated. I first explore the altered temporality of women in general, then turn to the temporality of women postponing or rejecting motherhood, and finally delve into mothers' temporality.

As Kristeva argues, "women's time" differs from the "linear and teleological time of history, society, and politics", being instead characterized by forms of cyclicity such as the menstrual cycle" (Chodorow, 1189). This does not imply a complete opposition to linear time, but rather the coexistence of multiple temporalities that do not always align with society's demands of productivity and progression (Jarvis et al., 32) developed in Chapter One. This tension has been theorized in relation to the expansion of neoliberalism alongside the

capitalist economy which has fostered “a culture that constantly strives for autonomy, financial success, and individual achievement, and that prioritizes personal responsibility” (Thomas, 2018, 72). Within this framework, Elizabeth Freedman’s concept of “chrononormativity” describes the ways in which time is used “to organize human bodies into maximum productivity” (Robertson, 4). Karen Davies notes that, although women are socialized into these linear time structures, certain dimensions of their lives continue to operate according to an alternate temporal logic (Thomas, 2018, 73). Therefore, not only mothers, but also women in general, live in a dual or altered temporality that is reflected formally through disrupted progression, repetition, and the fragmentation of temporal sequences (Page, 45).

Within this chrononormative framework, women’s reproductive lives are structured by a rigid and gendered temporality, often articulated through the discourse of the “fertility clock” (Chodorow, 1182), more frequently called the “biological clock” (Donath et al., 2). While Chapter One mentioned cultural and environmental changes leading to an increase in childlessness, and Chapter Two introduced childlessness in relation to the myths of motherhood, I focus here on the temporal and affective dimensions of that choice. This model of the “fertility clock” constructs reproduction as a linear trajectory, in which women are expected to “move forward” toward motherhood according to a culturally prescribed schedule (Donath et al., 1). From an early age, women are socialized into this temporal logic, learning that their reproductive capacity is limited and that decisions about motherhood must be made “on time” (Donath et al., 1; 4). As a result, life is organized into a sequence of normative stages – education, employment, marriage, parenthood – through which individuals are expected to progress “at the right time and the right pace, in order to develop in the right linear direction” (Donath et al., 4-5). This linear model thus structures expectations and produces a system of evaluation, in which individuals measure themselves against socially established timelines in order to determine whether they are progressing appropriately (Donath et al., 5).

Within such framework, women who do not conform to this temporal structure – whether by postponing or rejecting motherhood – are often positioned as being “out of time”, their choices framed as “unwarranted delay” or failure to progress (Donath et al., 5). Against this linear and progress-oriented model, states of indecision and childfree positioning thus open up alternative experiences of time that disrupt dominant temporal expectations. As Houser suggests, the question of reproduction often unfolds as a “dilated process of wondering”, in which the subject remains suspended in a state of potentiality rather than moving toward a definite outcome (621-622). This question of uncertainty challenges both pronatalist ideologies and neoliberal ideas of decisive, goal-oriented action (Donath et al., 3). By resisting the imperative to “move forward” (Donath et al., 1), indecision undermines the conception of reproductive time that organizes women's lives as linear, limited, and urgent, and instead creates a temporality marked by delay, suspension, and openness (Donath et al., 4-5; Houser, 621-622).

At the same time, this suspended temporality is ambivalent. Waiting is frequently associated with feelings of stagnation, vulnerability, and lack of control, and individuals are perceived as "being stuck" or "passively being at the mercy of time" (Donath et al., 5). Yet Donath et al. argue that it can also function as a form of temporal agency, allowing women to retain control over their life trajectories by keeping multiple possibilities open (11-12). Following Donath et al.'s logic, remaining undecided can therefore become both a site of tension (5) and potential resistance (11-12), enabling women to reframe the competing demands of biological, social, and neoliberal temporalities. The refusal or postponement of motherhood can thus be understood as a reconfiguration of time itself, challenging the expectation that women's lives unfold along with "the ticking of the biological clock" and according to a fixed and linear reproductive schedule (Donath et al., 1; 4). Besides structuring women's life choices, these competing frameworks shape their emotional experience, producing forms of irritation (Houser, 621), doubt, and shame ((Peterson et al., 382) – a dimension that has been explored in Chapter Two in the literature on childlessness.

While the previous paragraphs have explored the temporal pressures and suspensions surrounding the possibility of motherhood, the experience of motherhood itself transforms further these disruptions of linear time. As Thomas argues, the arrival of motherhood disrupts the systematic chrononormative tracking of time, stretching the present moment into a sort of "ongoingness", in which time escapes control and no longer follows familiar structures (2019, 73). This altered temporality is closely linked to embodied experience: this temporal disruption starts with pregnancy, which is governed by "mysterious somatic movements" (Thomas, 2019, 29). Unlike clock time, which is measurable and regulated, gestational time unfolds according to internal processes that cannot be fully predicted or managed (Thomas, 2019, 29). As Dana Birksted-Breen notes, pregnancy follows a "very defined time span with its inevitability" that can feel "entrapping", as it "proceeds without respite" and allows for "no going back and no slowing down" (Thomas, 2019, 29). This produces a paradoxical temporality that is at once progressive and uncontrollable, generating feelings of "helplessness, claustrophobia, and loss of control" (Thomas, 2019, 29). While pregnancy unfolds according to its own internal rhythm, the medical establishment attempts to impose linear, regulated time through monitoring and intervention, creating "a disjuncture between the development of the pregnancy itself and the desire to measure and control the mother's changing body" (Thomas, 2019, 29-30).

This imposition reflects an attempt to align maternal experience with chrononormative structures, in which time must be measured and made productive, moving away from a more natural procedure (Thomas, 2019, 30-31). However, such efforts often fail to fully contain the temporal logic of the body, which changes "in its own orbit" and remains resistant to external control (Thomas, 2019, 31). More broadly, pregnancy can be understood as an experience of temporal dislocation, in which the subject is drawn away from chronological time and into a somatic temporality defined by internal change (Thomas, 2019, 31). As Iris Marion Young suggests, while pregnancy may appear from the outside as a period

of waiting, for the mother it is characterized by “movement, growth, and change”, in which “time stretches out” and moments acquire a new depth through bodily transformation (Thomas, 2019, 31).

This alteration of time becomes even more pronounced during labor, which is often described as a state of temporal suspension or rupture (Thomas, 2019, 31-32). Experiences of childbirth are marked by a sense of timelessness, as “the night passes quickly, in the time that is no time” (Thomas, 2019, 31), or as a “cessation of time” in which there is “no intention, no activity, only a will to endure” (Thomas, 2019, 32). Temporal experience during labor oscillates between waiting – where time seems to refuse to pass – and urgency, governed not by external measurement but by the unpredictable rhythms of the body and the movements of the fetus (Thomas, 2019, 31-32). The pain of labor pushes beyond the bounds of time and brings the mother “to the edge of her life”, an impression that can be echoed by the fragmented structure reflecting the experience of disintegration (Callahan, 13). In such moments, clock time loses its relevance, and the subject enters an altered temporal state that exists outside everyday chronology (Thomas, 2019, 31-32). These embodied temporalities are mirrored at the level of narrative form: the disruption of linear time (Thomas, 2018, 71), the stretching or suspension of moments (Thomas, 2018, 75), and the coexistence of progression and statis are often reflected through non-linear structures, repetition, and the lingering on specific experiences (Thomas, 2019, 89; 119) rather than their integration into a forward-moving narrative.

This embodied temporality is further intensified through the routines of childcare, which are structured around interruption, redundancy, and repetitive tasks rather than progression, what Thomas describes as “a merged sequence of ‘nows’” (2019, 33). Robertson argues that the mother is constantly returned to the present through the child’s demands, such as their cries, demanding an instant reaction and challenging the "ideal linear development” of chrononormativity and “exhibiting a failure to ‘fit’ within normative time and space.” (Thomas, 2019, 32; Johnson, 32). Baraitser describes it as “care without ending”, a relentless cycle of maintenance (Johnson, 32) which refers in fact to the concept of “intensive mothering” by Sharon Hays. There is thus an “elongation of the present tense”, leading eventually to the recognition that time is no longer controllable, no longer entirely yours, and structured in an unfamiliar way (Thomas, 2019, 32).

This accumulation of interruptions, repetitive childcare tasks or “nows” can “merge into an incoherence” and a feeling of ongoingness, rather than progression (Thomas, 2019, 33). Motherhood thereby fractures the mother’s usual temporal awareness, simultaneously "dislocating” her from her previous work and routines, which now exist within a different temporal logic (Thomas, 2019, 33). Repetition and lack of narrative development, therefore, mirror the cyclical and non-progressive experience of time. At the same time, this redundancy is occasionally marked by milestones (Johnson, 31), signaling progression. However, these milestones, such as the first smile or the first word, “may exclude or shame rather than

reassure, may feel oppressive rather than comforting", as they also exist on a timeline (Johnson, 32).

While the mother is pulled into a seemingly never-ending present by the child's interruptions, Baraitser argues that "the maternal subject bears the suspension of time, a kind of impossible waiting which is the time the child's futurity requires of her" (Thomas, 2019, 35). A mother's orientation toward the future is not lost, but instead becomes embedded in the child's unfolding development and is constantly being renegotiated (Thomas, 2019, 35). This can create a crisis of identity, as "the mother is required to give herself over somatically and temporally to the development of the child" (Thomas, 2019, 36). Furthermore, the mother is not only frozen in the present and continually reconstructing her sense of the future, but she is also revisiting the past through motherhood (Thomas, 2019, 42). Indeed, motherhood is an experience through which the mother re-encounters herself as an infant in relation to her own mother, becoming newly aware of the maternal care that sustains generations and perpetuates cyclical time (Thomas, 2019, 42). Stone adds that past and present overlap in the mother's experience, as she revisits her own maternal history through the physical and immediate nature of the mother-child relation (Thomas, 2019, 42). Rather than progressing in a linear direction, maternal temporality thus appears to be structured by simultaneous attachments to different temporal dimensions. This temporal entanglement can appear at the level of narrative form through the collapse of chronological boundaries (Thomas, 2019, 112).

The altered temporal structures of motherhood can also produce moments of heightened awareness and existential clarity, which Heidegger's terms as a "moment of vision" (Thomas, 2019, 45). In such instance, the subject is momentarily displaced from the linear flow of everyday, socially structured time (Thomas, 2019, 44-45). Rather than existing within past, present, or future, the subject experiences these temporal dimensions simultaneously, in what Heidegger describes as a convergence of temporal "ecstases" (Thomas, 2019, 44). To reach a "moment of vision", one "must undergo a form of transformative event" (Thomas, 2019, 45). In the context of motherhood, this shift is often precipitated by the disruptions outlined above – pregnancy, childbirth, and the constant interruptions of childcare – which dislocate the mother from chrononormative time and open up a different mode of temporal awareness (Thomas, 2019, 48-49).

While the previous paragraphs have demonstrated that maternal temporality is characterized by cyclicality, repetition, disruption, futurity, extension of the present, returns to the past, and "moments of vision" (Thomas, 2019, 32; 33; 35; 42; 45; 73), I now turn to affects that are created by these temporalities. Being "pushed" into this altered temporality can generate feelings of loneliness and isolation, as the mother becomes increasingly detached from shared social rhythms and chrononormative expectations (Thomas, 2019, 74). Furthermore, through the temporal structure of interruption, the mother is repeatedly brought back into the immediacy of the present through the child's demands, each

interruption creating a rupture in the flow of experience that both destabilizes and reorients the subject (Thomas, 2019, 49). These interruptions are not neutral on the level of affect: they are affectively charged moments that can generate frustration, anxiety, or disorientation, while also opening up to new possibilities of perception (Thomas, 2019, 49). Baraitser describes these intense and sudden emotional shifts as “micro-blows”, whose “multiplicity” and “relentlessness” “disorganize experience” and constitute “the very ground of mothering” (Thomas, 2019, 91).

An affective dynamic is also visible in the mother’s response to the child’s distress. The infant’s cry, a primary expression of need and pain, produces an equally immediate and powerful affective reaction in the mother, often characterized by panic, guilt, shame, and a sense of inadequacy (Thomas, 2019, 91). This emotional change in the mother can also be marked by “panic, resentment, fatigue, anger” (Thomas, 2019, 91). These affective responses are not isolated moments but recur persistently, contributing to what Johnson describes as a haunting awareness of the “potential for failures of care” (42). Finally, these affective dynamics can also be understood in relation to the “moments of vision” discussed earlier. Such disruptions may generate heightened states of awareness that are both unsettling and potentially transformative, producing feelings of anxiety alongside feelings of emancipation (Thomas, 2019, 48). What emerges, then, is that maternal affect is marked by the recurring return of certain affects, as the mother is repeatedly brought back by interruptions or the anticipation of interruption, creating the sense of non-progression in which emotional resolution remains out of reach.

In this respect, maternal narratives complicate the assumptions of self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing, which typically tend to frame emotional experience as something that can be narrated coherently and worked through over time toward clarity, healing, and resolution (Bauer, 213; Nehring, 319). From the pressures of reproductive timing (Donath et al., 1) and the suspended temporality of indecision (Houser, 621) to the repetitive and interruptive structures of maternal experience (Thomas, 2019, 33), several temporal disruptions and affective tensions were described throughout this section. They have in common that they resist closure by foregrounding the endurance of ongoing and recurring affective states. Thomas adds that they “disturb standard emotional trajectories through their use of secondary sources, fragmented form, ambiguous characters, and interrupted chronology” (2019, 134). It highlights how these narratives – whether centered on the wondering or lived experience of motherhood – represent temporalities and affect differently than dominant cultural scripts, also challenging social expectations of how maternal experience itself should be felt and narrated (Daubenmire, 10). This type of maternal narrative thus differs from the “traditional memoir” where, according to Di Summa-Knoop, the narrative typically moves towards a sense of closure accompanied by emotional resolution, allowing the memoirist to work through their experiences towards a deeper understanding of themselves (Thomas, 2019, 132-133).

Furthermore, this chapter has demonstrated that content is inseparable from form in the case of fragmented narratives (Thomas, 2019, 89; Page, 45). Formal strategies such as repetition, circularity, complex syntax, and temporal disruption challenge representations of motherhood as a linear progression toward fulfillment, instead revealing it as an unstable experience marked by ambivalence and ongoing negotiation. The contradictions that characterize maternal narratives, ul Huda argues, are not a sign that "women fail", but that "they thrive because contradiction is honest" (536).

Chapter 6 - Critical Reception of *Motherhood* & *A Life's Work*

Having outlined the corpus, its context, its generic positioning, and the concepts that are useful for its analysis, it is also important to situate these works within existing critical debates. Both Rachel Cusk and Sheila Heti have generated significant scholarly discussion, particularly in relation to contemporary narratives of motherhood. The following sections review key contributions in the secondary literature, in order to identify the main critical concerns surrounding these works. It first examines the reception of *Motherhood*, followed by that of *A Life's Work*. It then explores scholars' works that explicitly compare both works, before positioning this thesis in response to this existing scholarship.

6.1. Critical Reception of *Motherhood*

Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* has attracted considerable critical attention for her "reluctance to become a mother" (Henriksson et al., 5). Scholars have primarily focused on its exploration of reproductive choice and its philosophical interrogation of cultural expectations surrounding motherhood. As Houser argues, the novel is less concerned with the final act of choosing than with what precedes it: a "dilated process of wondering" that structures the text and highlights indecision (621).

The novel engages with both social and biological pressure around having children, questioning whether motherhood is biologically determined or socially constructed (Fahlgren et al., 139). It advances the idea that the absence of a desire to have children may be as innate as the desire to have them and might be a "biological or even sexual orientation" in itself, thereby disrupting assumptions of women as natural mothers (Fahlgren et al., 140). The narrator's description of women who have children as "the normal sort of woman" signals her awareness of a dominant cultural script that she seeks to contest (Fahlgren et al., 142). The narrative oscillates between acceptance and resistance, revealing how deeply notions of motherhood and "normality" are embedded in both thought and practice (Fahlgren et al., 142). Fahlgren et al. argue that eventually, her final decision not to become a mother defies cultural scripts and can be read as a refusal of dominant cultural expectations (Fahlgren et al., 149). However, Houser notes that this decision arrives less as a moment of clarity than as "the clock run[ning] out on wondering." (629). Furthermore, as Thomas suggests, this hesitation is linked to a deeper orientation away from futurity, in which the narrator's reflections turn back toward unresolved past relations "rather than forwards towards children" (2019, 82).

Another important focus in the scholarship concerns the maternal lineage, and more specifically the relationship between the narrator and her mother. The narrator's decision is strongly influenced by this mother-daughter relationship and by intergenerational trauma linked to her Hungarian-Jewish background and the decimation of family members during the Holocaust (Fahlgren et al., 144). Reproduction is perceived by the narrator's family as a "moral

obligation" within this context, shaping the narrator's reflections on motherhood (Fahlgren et al., 144). Houser similarly highlights how such historical and cultural pressures converge with the narrator's questioning, noting that her wondering is entangled with questions of obligation to ancestors and collective survival, even as she resists these imperatives (628; 638). This dynamic situates the narrator within a temporal movement that "writes backwards" toward her mother and ancestors, suggesting that the question of motherhood is inseparable from an attempt to address inherited histories (Thomas, 2019, 64). Thereby, Thomas places *Motherhood* in what Marianne Hirsch names the 'return narrative' (2019, 55).

In addition, the narrator recalls a mother who always cried and put her work before her children, therefore growing up convinced that she was the reason for her mother's depression (Fahlgren et al., 145). This idea of children as a burden transmitted by her mother impacts her vision of motherhood, reinforcing the reluctance to have children (Fahlgren et al., 145). The mother-daughter dyad is structured by ambivalence, by an "unresolved push and pull" marked by guilt, anxiety, and melancholy, affects that originate in early relational dynamics and continue to shape the narrator's perception of motherhood (Thomas, 2019, 55). However, the once-absent mother becomes increasingly present as the narrative progresses, evolving into some reconciliation with a supportive answer to the narrator's manuscript on motherhood (Fahlgren et al., 145). Her identification with, and recognition by, her mother seem crucial to answering the novel's central question and bringing peace to the narrator's final decision of remaining child-free (Fahlgren et al., 146). The narrator's engagement with her mother can be read as a form of ongoing reparation, where she attempts, through writing, to work through these inherited emotional tensions (Thomas, 2019, 56; 77). The book exemplifies the matrilineal narrative that Yi-Lin Yu identifies in much contemporary women's writing, portraying motherhood as embedded in intergenerational ties that continue to shape new generations (Fahlgren et al., 146).

Furthermore, the book has been studied for its complicated merging of identity as a writer and as a mother. The narrator is highly aware that becoming a mother would compromise her career as writer and describes an internal conflict between a creative life as writer and maternal expectations (Fahlgren et al., 139). She also mentions the feeling of guilt for "prioritizing art over motherhood" and emphasizes the cultural difference between female and male artists (Fahlgren et al., 139). As Braun adds, "this sacrifice is only expected of women in the context of our patriarchal society, whereas men are never really under the obligation to let go of their social status" (§5). *Motherhood* can thus be situated within a broader literary trend of writers reflecting on the stakes of combining artistic ambition with reproduction, while emphasizing that in Heti's case, the narrator's artistic project is inseparable from the process of wondering that structures the novel (Houser, 628).

The feminist critic Nina Björk also read *Motherhood* as presenting a tension between freedom and motherhood and putting forward childless life as necessary for creative work (Fahlgren et al., 142). Björk's analysis also emphasizes the impact of social and political

conditions surrounding motherhood: the protagonist in *Motherhood* describes her friends' expectations of lost autonomy and professional identity, and childcare becoming a primary occupation after childbirth – a depiction that highlights the influence of class and economic conditions on maternal expectations and experiences (Fahlgren et al., 142).

Certain formal features of this wondering have also drawn critical attention. As Houser demonstrates, the narrator's decision-making process – modelled on the *I Ching* through coin tosses that yield yes/no answers – plays a crucial role in shaping the novel's structure, producing sequences of questions and italicized responses (629). The spiraling wondering of the narrator is articulated through what Houser describes as "contortions of thought and grammar" organized around negating, wanting, and having (621; 633). The narrator's repeated formulations of "not", "nothing", "not-nice" multiply negation to the point where it becomes a space of possibility rather than simple refusal, allowing her to "hover between identities" and resist being defined solely in opposition to motherhood (Houser, 631-632). Another example of language contortion around "wanting" is the narrator's "wanting to want to reproduce", generating both irritation and a "poke at individuals and social norms" (Houser, 634). Generally speaking, this dynamic of wondering is expressed through "suspensions, paradoxes, contradictions, repetitions, metafeelings, double negatives, and nonsensical formulations" (Houser, 640).

Finally, the autofiction was received with strong public criticism. Heti was regarded as too self-absorbed, with the narrator in *Motherhood* described as "a cynical writer contemplating whether to have kids before it's too late" (Fahlgren et al., 143; 148). Houser links such responses to the novel's dynamic, in which withholding and circling around the final answer generate a sense of irritation in readers (637). Drawing on Sianne Ngai, she identifies irritation as an ugly feeling produced by the text, arising from a situation where the narrator's "motivations are uncertain, absent, or illegible" (Houser, 637).

6.2. Critical Reception of *A Life's Work*

Rachel Cusk's memoir *A Life's Work* has been researched so far as "the voicing of maternal discontent" (Henriksson et al., 5). It has been the object of significant critical and public discussion since its publication in 2001. Much of the existing scholarship examines the controversy surrounding the book's reception. Indeed, it has been the object of fierce criticism in the media, where she was attacked – mostly by women – on her parenting skills (Braun, §3). Such reactions are not unique to Cusk but characteristic of the reception of maternal memoirs, which have provoked "dismay at or contempt" for their articulation of dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the experience of mothering (Quiney, 19). The author herself published an article in *The Guardian*, reflecting on the intense reactions of certain reviewers and her own bewilderment at some of the most hostile responses to her work (Braun, §1).

In the case of Cusk, Braun argues that this public backlash against her memoir can be explained by two primary reasons (§5). Firstly, she was labeled selfish for writing about motherhood instead of quietly fulfilling the role of mother, which illustrates the expectation of mothers being entirely devoted to their children and the perception of motherhood as a trivial subject unworthy of "serious" literature (Braun, §5; 21). This expectation is reinforced by a broader cultural framework in which the maternal body is subjected to external scrutiny and control, particularly during pregnancy, when it becomes "public property" governed by normative expectations and institutional oversight (Thomas, 2019, 95), and more generally by the ideal of the 'good mother' (Quiney, 24).

Secondly, readers were shocked by the extreme metaphors she used to describe both maternal experiences and her daughter, which sharply contrast with dominant cultural narratives of maternal happiness (Braun, §5; 7). She describes her experience with totalitarian imagery, comparing pregnancy and motherhood to a fascist regime governed by propaganda, to a labor camp where the mother is stripped of her social self, and to an execution chamber (Braun, §7; 8; 11; 14). Thomas similarly notes that Cusk figures pregnancy as a form of "colonisation" of the body and subjectivity, producing feelings of claustrophobia and loss of autonomy that destabilize the notion of a coherent maternal self (2019, 95).

It is argued in Braun's article that the metaphors Cusk uses to describe motherhood do not rely only on the imagery of totalitarianism – or as Thomas noticed, on imagery of colonialism –, but on that of Gothic horror as well, such as when she comes back home after the childbirth (Braun; §9). Indeed, during the postpartum return to home, Cusk feels as though she as entered "the house of someone who has just died" (Thomas, 2019, 99). She also uses vocabulary that differs from the image of a loving mother, such as "ruck-sack" and "escaped zoo animal" to describe her daughter (Fahlgren et al., 143). Braun adds that this backlash also stems from Cusk's honesty about her own experience of motherhood, which challenges popular narratives that celebrate these experiences as a woman's greatest source of happiness (§8). Furthermore, such honesty exposes the "insidious cultural communication" that dictates which pertain "the incompatibility of different female subjectivities; the widespread moral expectation [...] that the mother should be the most important of women's identities" (Thomas, 2019, 100).

Another important focus in scholarship on *A Life's Work* is how the memoir challenges dominant cultural scripts of motherhood, destabilizing the figure of the 'good mother' (Fahlgren et al., 138). Besides metaphors, Cusk breaks the image of the blissful mother by confronting parenting books and showing the gap with reality (Braun, §11). When she reads manuals on motherhood, she finds herself faced with images of beautiful and happy mothers, contrasting with her difficulties and pushing her further in her loneliness (Fahlgren et al., 143). Another way Cusk challenges the cultural scripts is by putting forward the social invisibility she experiences upon becoming a mother (Braun, §17). This invisibility occurs when motherhood strips a woman of her social self, reducing her to a state of "bare life" focused

entirely on the infant's survival (Braun, §14; 18). A major driver of this structural issue is the modern separation between the home and the workplace, leading to a lack of status and social meaninglessness for the person looking after the child (Braun, §18; 19).

The narrative's strong emphasis on the "I", coupled with her partner's marginal presence, underscores the narrator's isolation (Fahlgren et al., 143). As the baby becomes more mobile, Cusk's anxiety and sense of confinement intensify, making it increasingly difficult for her to leave home; the book reflects a contrast between the feeling of imprisonment of her apartment and the danger of the outer world (Fahlgren et al., 143). Although childcare offers temporary relief, the narrative remains centered on the "I" and her emotional entrapment, underscoring the impossibility of fully reclaiming her former self (Fahlgren et al., 143). This condition even reflects a fragmentation of subjectivity, in which the "unified, capable" pre-maternal self is progressively displaced by the demands of motherhood, resulting in a tension between incompatible identities – that of the autonomous individual and that of the mother (Thomas, 2019, 100-101). Moreover, this fragmentation of the self is reinforced by the absence of supportive maternal community, as other mothers are represented as enforcers of normative expectations rather than sources of solidarity (Quiney, 32).

Closely related to this critique of cultural norms, *A Life's Work* has attracted scholars' attention for its representation of maternal ambivalence. Cusk perceives the concept of the "motherbaby" unit as "poisoned by her intrusive feelings of ambivalence" (Thomas, 2019, 100). Thomas also highlights the paradox whereby the mother is never fully herself either with or without the child, since the child exerts a continuous "jurisdiction of her consciousness" even in moments of separation (2019, 92). The maternal subject is thus caught in a perpetual tension, which disrupts any stable sense of identity (Thomas, 2019, 92). Such writing is fundamentally preoccupied with exposing the "tensions and conflicts and contradictions" rather than resolving them, thereby highlighting maternal ambivalence (Quiney, 23).

A Life's Work has also been widely studied for its conflict between the identity as a writer and as a mother. Cusk's self-conception as a "modern privileged" writer allowed her to disregard biology, until her pregnancy forces her to confront them (Fahlgren et al., 139). She therefore starts exploring this "unknown territory" which is motherhood as a writer (Fahlgren et al., 140). Upon becoming a mother, Cusk realizes that some of the social privileges she once enjoyed as an educated, middle-class artist in London have been diminished, and she experiences childcare as absorbing her creative energy (Braun, §5). Her impression is that her "earlier life as a writer is incompatible with motherhood", and that discrepancy is never resolved (Fahlgren et al., 143; 148). Furthermore, this incompatibility is reinforced by the constant interruptions of maternal care, which fragment time and attention, allowing only brief moments in which thought and creative work can re-emerge (Thomas, 2019, 92). Brown also points to the loss of bodily autonomy not only during pregnancy but also in practices such

as nursing (207). Nevertheless, she discovers that motherhood reshapes her reading experience in ways that are not necessarily negative, allowing her to perceive new layers in books she had previously read (Fahlgren et al., 143).

Finally, critics have examined the formal dimension of *A Life's Work*. Cusk approaches life narrative through what has been described as a "book of repetition", a new literary form that replaces traditional linear narratives with a circular structure to mirror the "eternal and unvarying" nature of domesticity (Braun, §25). Cusk's narrative disrupts linear, teleological chronology by reflecting a temporality shaped by interruption, repetition, and the cyclical demands of care, in which time is experienced as an "undifferentiated mass" structured only by the rhythms of the child (Thomas, 2019, 33-34; 118). The mother is thus displaced from chrononormative time into a form of "ongoingness", marked by unpredictability (Thomas, 2019, 33-34). This formal strategy rejects the "mystification" of motherhood by focusing on its mundane aspects, thereby providing a literary framework for representing maternal experiences that are usually excluded from "serious" literature (Braun, §25). In addition, *A Life's Work* has also been placed in what Rita Felski describes as "confessional writing": a form of autobiographical writing that explicitly seeks to foreground the author's most intimate and personal experiences, bringing the private into the public sphere while rejecting the filters of objectivity in order to convey subjective truth (Quiney, 21). In the case of Cusk, such a form has the potential to challenge "dominant cultural definitions of appropriate mothering" (Quiney, 22).

6.3. Comparative Criticism

While *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* are sometimes reviewed together in discussion of contemporary (autobiographical) narratives of motherhood, such as in the work of Mariana Thomas, they are often mentioned in relation to their confrontation with cultural scripts but not explicitly compared. A smaller body of scholarship places Cusk and Heti in direct dialogue. Fahlgren et al., for example, compare *A Life's Work* and *Motherhood* as autobiographical narratives that contest dominant cultural scripts surrounding motherhood, analyzing certain similarities. They note how both works emphasize that knowledge about reproduction and motherhood is shaped by such scripts, "which are especially strong if sanctioned and supported by structural conditions in society" (Fahlgren et al., 138).

Fahlgren et al. highlight how the two texts foreground ambivalence, by noting that "ambivalence toward motherhood is striking in both works" (136). This ambivalence is accompanied by the recognition of "irrational and unpleasant feelings", such as frustration and grief (Fahlgren et al., 147-148). Heti's narrator grieves the friends she feels she lost to motherhood, whereas Cusk grieves her former identity (Fahlgren et al., 147). In addition, both texts "lean on emotions as well as intellectual argument", combining emotions with developed reflection on the social and biological implications of motherhood (Fahlgren et al., 136; 138).

Both narrators also closely scrutinize their emotional responses to the remarks, advice, and behavior of those around them, conveying further a sense of reality and resonating with readers' personal experiences, what Fahlgren et al. believe to be in part responsible for the intense reactions they triggered (Fahlgren et al., 147; 148). They add that it reveals that despite the emphasis on individual choice "in modern society", decisions about motherhood are shaped by social bonds and generational contexts that extend beyond the self (148). Through their explorations of work, family, sex, reproduction, childcare, gender, and financial realities, Cusk and Heti illustrate that motherhood is never merely a personal matter but a societal concern (Fahlgren et al., 149). Both texts thus demonstrate that "the questions of motherhood and mothering [...] are delineated as a dynamic between individual, social, and political circumstances (Fahlgren et al., 136).

Both works also explore the tension between maternal identity and intellectual or creative life, foregrounding what Fahlgren et al. describes as "the conflict between being a creative person, a writer, and a mother" (139). While Cusk confronts the tension between writing and motherhood retrospectively, after becoming a mother, the protagonist in *Motherhood* attempts to resolve it prospectively, before deciding whether to have a child (Fahlgren et al., 140). The fear of losing an independent, creative life in *Motherhood* thus becomes a lived reality in Cusk's narrative, particularly in the aftermath of childbirth when she comes back home (Fahlgren et al., 142).

Fahlgren et al. Also identify the "exercise of attention" that is present in both texts, a concept in contemporary life writing developed by Tori Moi (136). It involves the writer's attentiveness to reality, which can in turn encourage readers to sharpen their awareness of both life and literature (Fahlgren et al., 137). Through the exercise of attention, narrators "necessarily reveal who they are, by which [...] they will reveal the specific nature of their own capacity for attention, at the same time as they say something about the world" (Fahlgren et al., 147). Both narrators in *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* observe their everyday experiences and with that investigate existential questions surrounding motherhood, formulating questions such as whether becoming a mother entails the loss of the self or of an identity as writer (Fahlgren et al., 137). In Heti's work, this exercise of attention takes the form of an ongoing intellectual and emotional reflection unfolding in the present, whereas Cusk focuses on childrearing manuals and the advice of mothers and medical professionals (Fahlgren et al., 137).

Finally, maternal lineage constitutes another important point of comparison. While both narratives depict the modern woman as largely autonomous, they nevertheless "recognize the maternal lineage, albeit in different ways" (Fahlgren et al., 144). In *Motherhood*, the relationship between mother and daughter is pervasive, shaping the narrator's reflections to a striking extent (Fahlgren et al., 144). In *A Life's Work*, by contrast, the maternal line is marked by absence: Cusk's relationship with her own mother appears distant, and moments such as her mother's unsupportive response to her fear of childbirth

reinforce a sense that “mothers today are on their own” (Fahlgren et al., 145). This absence helps explaining the prominence of child-care manuals in Cusk’s narrative, which substitute for a lack of intergenerational guidance (Fahlgren et al., 145). In addition, Cusk’s memoir foregrounds her relation to other mothers, often characterized by a sense of non-identification (Fahlgren et al., 146). While *Motherhood* is marked by the relation between Heti and her mother, the mother-daughter relationship in *A Life’s Work* is thus mostly between Cusk and her daughter.

To conclude, Fahlgren et al. pointed several similarities between Heti’s *Motherhood* and Cusk’s *A Life’s Work*: they offer “alternatives discourses” and thereby broaden “the concept of motherhood” (136) through their confrontation with cultural scripts and the questioning of social and biological questions; they explore emotions, featuring specifically ambivalence, and lean as well on intellectual argument; they examine the conflict between the life of a writer and the life of a mother; and they delve into the impact of matrilineage.

While existing scholarship on *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work* has generated important insights, particularly regarding thematic concerns such as reproductive choice, maternal ambivalence, and the critique of normative motherhood, there has been less attention to certain aspects. This thesis positions itself in response to these gaps, emphasizing the interplay between affect and narrative form, and by situating both texts in relation to self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing.

First, criticism has tended to privilege thematic over formal analysis. Although scholars such as Houser or Thomas observe certain stylistic features in respectively *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work*, this attention remains relatively limited in scope. Houser focuses primarily on grammatical phenomena such as negation or syntactic “contortions”, and Thomas on the general cyclical and repetitive structure in relation to temporality. Furthermore, discussions of form in both texts often remain general or secondary to thematic concerns. Affect is frequently treated descriptively, as a set of emotional states represented in the texts, rather than a structure that shapes narrative form. As a result, there is little analysis of how affect and form operate together. This thesis addresses this gap by demonstrating how paradoxical affects are not only represented but formally embedded in the narrative structure, and how this interplay is central to both Heti’s and Cusk’s works.

Second, comparative scholarship on *Motherhood* and *A Life’s Work* remains limited. While critics have noted certain similarities – most notably their shared engagement with maternal norms and their focus on women’s reproductive lives –, differences between the texts are often reduced to their thematic distinction: Heti’s focus on reproductive decision-making versus Cusk’s account of early motherhood, or their differing relations to matrilineage. There has been little analysis on how these differences extend to narrative form, temporality, and affect. This thesis addresses thus this gap in Chapter Nine by offering

a comparative analysis that identifies convergences but also divergences in how each text mobilizes form and affect to challenge motherhood myths.

Finally, there is almost no scholarship that situates these texts in relation to the frameworks of self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. Although both *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* engage with discourses of introspection and emotional processing, central to self-help culture, they do not straightforwardly reproduce its logic. By drawing on theories of self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing, this thesis demonstrates how both texts simultaneously engage with and disrupt therapeutic narrative models.

In response to existing scholarship, this thesis offers an analysis that brings together affect theory, narrative form, and self-help culture. Chapters Seven and Eight provide close readings of *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work*, respectively, demonstrating how each text uses specific formal strategies – such as fragmentation, recursive structures, and non-linear temporalities – to register and sustain affects that are not culturally accepted or marginalized in dominant narratives of motherhood. These analyses reveal how affect and form are inseparable in their challenge to dominant motherhood myths. By foregrounding this interplay and by situating it within the broader context of self-help and therapeutic discourses, this thesis contributes to a new perspective to the study of contemporary maternal life writing.

Chapter 7 - Affect & Narrative Form in Heti's *Motherhood*

The thesis has established how myths of motherhood are sustained through dominant narratives of fulfillment and clarity, thereby engaging with the logic of self-help hermeneutics. This chapter examines how *Motherhood* formally and affectively unsettles these expectations, particularly those that frame reproductive decision-making as an evident, intentional, and emotionally coherent process culminating in fulfillment. Rather than moving toward a decisive answer to the question of whether to have a child, the text lingers in a space of hesitation, where reflection repeatedly circles back on itself without producing closure. Although the book's ending ultimately aligns with remaining childless, this outcome is not the result of a clear or active decision but instead emerges through delay as the narrator's childbearing years gradually pass and take away the possibility of choice. In doing so, the text both resists the teleological structure of self-help hermeneutics, in which reflection and therapeutic writing are expected to lead to self-knowledge and decisive action, and the strand of self-help books framing childlessness as an empowering choice. However, it also engages with the strand of self-help literature addressed to women experiencing uncertainty about motherhood, but resists its underlying logic of self-improvement. The novel also engages with the "memoir of becoming", a form that recounts the journey toward childlessness (Spurlong, 842).

While *Motherhood* is shaped by broader social and cultural discourses surrounding reproduction and motherhood, this chapter focuses primarily on how these tensions are articulated through affect and narrative form. Their relationship to the broader contemporary discourses established in the theoretical chapters will be examined comparatively alongside Cusk's *A Life's Work* in Chapter Nine. This chapter first examines the macro-structure of the text, focusing on its shift from a linear organization to a cyclical temporality structured around the menstrual cycle, as well as its fragmented aspect. It then turns to specific combinations of affect and form, examining how formal strategies such as cyclical repetition, fragmentation, recursion, and the incorporation of interpretive systems produce certain affective states. By tracing the interaction between narrative form and affective experience, this chapter argues that *Motherhood* does not resolve ambivalence but constructs and sustains it through formal and affective strategies, thereby challenging the myth that motherhood constitutes the ultimate achievement and the greatest source of fulfillment in a woman's life.

7.1. Narrative Structure of Wondering

At the level of its large-scale structure, *Motherhood* produces a shift from a linear progression typical of self-help logic to a cyclical temporality that mirrors the narrator's increasing indecision. The opening chapters – titled for instance "New York", "Book Tour", and "Home" – initially suggest a degree of narrative coherence, anchored in recognizable

spaces and temporalities. This early organization appears to point to a chrononormative framework, in which experience unfolds progressively, following the thematic focus of each chapter. However, this linear organization is then replaced by a different temporal logic as the book becomes structured around the narrator's menstrual cycle. The chapters become structured according to phases of the cycle – "PMS", "Bleeding", "Follicular", and "Ovulating" –, reorienting the narrative around a bodily, circular temporality rather than a progressive one. It also foregrounds a specifically gendered temporality, linking the question of motherhood to the rhythms of the body without resolving the tension between biological time and personal desire.

Such change from chrononormative time disrupts expectations of development and resolution. The cyclical structure mirrors the narrator's recursive patterns of thought, in which the question of whether or not to have a child is repeatedly revisited without arriving at a definitive conclusion until she is "too old" to have kids. This temporality itself becomes affectively filled, registering states of for instance guilt and anxiety, turning into a fluctuation rather than emotional development or progress. This shift can also reflect a growing sense of disorientation and ambivalence in her wondering, feeling a need to connect herself to her felt temporality in hope of getting closer to answers.

As the narrative shifts from chapters titled according to external locations or events to chapters titled according to embodied temporal markers, the text thus foregrounds a form of "felt" temporality that is closely tied to the narrator's affective states. Importantly, this shift in the chapters' organizing principle does not entail a move away from the narrator's professional and literary life, which remains present within the embodied chapters. Rather, her literary production is now brought within a temporality structured around the rhythms of the body. Strikingly, the sections associated with premenstrual ("PMS)" and menstrual ("Bleeding") phases are marked by heightened negativity, including irritation, frustration, distress, and sadness: "Weeks have passed, and the tears, once again, are back. What am I supposed to do with my unhappiness?" (Heti, 2018, 173). Such excerpt demonstrates that affect is connected to the temporality of menstrual cycles, returning every month and diverging from a linear time.

Furthermore, the chapters dedicated to these two phases of the menstrual cycle are significantly longer, revealing the narrator's need to release her feelings through writing: "I write more before my period than at any other time" (Heti, 2018, 205). In this sense, the book goes to a certain degree along the logic of therapeutic writing: "I know the longer I work on this book, the less likely it is I will have a child. [...] This book is a prophylactic" (Heti, 2018, 193). However, despite a certain emotional release and the impression of getting closer to an answer, the narrator falls back to uncertainty time and again, and the heightened negative affects return each cycle. The problem, however, does not seem to come from writing directly, but from the constant ambivalence and pressure she feels from the reproductive decision that lingers throughout the book.

These affective intensities are not only described but are produced through formal disruption. Indeed, the narrative becomes more fragmented, less continuous, and more erratic in its movement between thoughts in the chapters “PMS” and “Bleeding”. This correlation between a more pronounced formal disruption and more negative feelings suggests that affect and form do not function separately but operate together, with moments of heightened emotional intensity producing greater structural instability. This fragmentation appears with the incorporation of heterogeneous textual elements, including the *I Ching* consultation method, tarot reading, dream sequences, and illustrations. The increased use of the *I Ching* method in these phases reveals a more distressed emotional state, in need of guidance. It also introduces an external system for decision-making that both resembles and undermines the logic of self-help: while it appears to offer guidance or structure, it ultimately reinforces the narrator’s inability to reach a stable conclusion, producing a circular rather than a teleological movement.

Conversely, the chapters “Follicular” and “Ovulating” are more oriented towards philosophical reflections on time, relationships, history and mothering: “What is the main activity of a woman’s life, if not motherhood? How can I express the absence of this experience, without making central the lack?” (Heti, 2018, 159). Yet the four phases of the menstrual cycle do not correspond to completely differentiated affective and thematic stages: the phases “Follicular” and “Ovulating” are not devoid of negative feelings, ambivalence, and fragmentation, nor are the phases “PMS” and “Bleeding” exempt from philosophical reflections. The book is in fact a constant outpouring of philosophical reflections and feelings, inspired by life anecdotes and beliefs, revealing that her inquiry into motherhood is never stable, no matter which menstrual phase occurs.

The book’s final chapters further complicate any expectation of resolution. In the last conversation with the *I Ching*, the narrator’s final question, “Of these same things will I ever again be afraid?” (Heti, 2018, 244), remains unanswered. The unanswered question leaves open the possibility that the affective uncertainties surrounding motherhood may persist even as the possibility of childbearing is foreclosing. The narrative then moves into a series of untitled chapters – which suggests the arrival of the menopause – in which the definitive decision not to have children emerges gradually, however mostly framed by the recognition of biological limitation – it is “too late” – rather than an active choice. The absence of chapter titles in these final sections indicates the text’s divergence from the cyclical structure, suggesting that the narrator’s life is no longer punctuated by the circular repetition of menstrual cycles and that she has also moved beyond the linear development imposed by society.

At the level of the page, this resistance to narrative continuity is reinforced by the use of fragmentation. Chapters are divided into fragments of varying length by tilde (~) separators, consisting of isolated observations or shifts in reflections. This formal strategy prevents the emergence of a continuous argumentative or narrative thread, mirroring the

narrator's own interrupted and recursive thinking processes. Together, the formal strategies of cyclical temporality, fragmentation, recursive structuring, and the incorporation of guiding systems and illustrations produce a narrative that resists the coherence, clarity, and transformation typically associated with therapeutic and self-help discourses.

This large-scale temporal and structural organization is mirrored at the micro-level of the text, where affect and form interact. While this overview has mapped the broad structural dynamics of *Motherhood*, the following sections therefore examine how recurrent formal strategies generate specific affective intensities. They move from the emotional flatness associated with cyclical temporality, to the more agitated affects produced by fragmentation and recursion, and finally to inhibiting affects that emerge both through the narrator's interactions with others and through her fear that motherhood might interrupt her artistic creation? This latter concern is articulated through the recurring analogy between writing and reproduction.

7.2. Cyclical Temporality and Emotional Flatness

While the cyclical structure of *Motherhood* organizes the narrative around repetition rather than progression, it does not only delay the decision regarding children but also produces a particular affective relation to time. Rather than generating heightened tension or urgency with the passing years, the repeated return to the same question gradually flattens emotional intensity. However, his emotional flatness is occasionally interrupted by outbursts, which will be explored in the next section. Time is not experienced as a movement towards resolution, but as an extended and cyclical present in which the same questions, affects, and reflections return without definitive transformation or without a so-called "moment of vision". This formal organization produces a sense of detachment and exhaustion, where the problem remains, and the decision becomes suspended. In this regard, temporality in the novel is a structure that maintains ambivalence over time, with an emotional charge that becomes diffuse and repetitive.

This temporal experience is linked to moments of emotional flatness, where the narrator explicitly registers a lack of feeling. She reflects for instance on the possibility that the expected emotions associated with motherhood – desire, fulfillment, joy – are for her simply absent. Rather than experiencing a clear longing, she encounters "a kind of sadness" that resembles indifference:

> There is a kind of sadness in not wanting the things that give so many other people their life's meaning. There can be sadness at not living out a more universal story – the supposed life cycle – how out of one life cycle another cycle is supposed to come. But when out of your life, no new cycle comes, what does that feel like? It feels like nothing. (Heti, 2018, 23).

This passage reveals that she is stuck in the same cycle of uncertainty, culminating in a sense of emptiness. The absence of longing challenges the assumption that reproductive decision-

making is driven by strong and coherent emotions. Instead, the narrator is confronted with a more ambiguous affective state, in which the lack of desire becomes troubling. The “nothing” she describes does not necessarily signify an absence of affect, but rather the difficulty of articulating a feeling whose content is precisely the absence of an identifiable feeling. Therefore, the problem is not only that she does not know what she wants, but that she cannot identify a stable affective position from which to determine what she wants. However, as Houser argues, the negative language such as “nothing”, “not”, no one”, “won’t” can also become an active position through which the narrator rejects the expectations attached to motherhood and femininity (631-632). Whereas the “nothing” of this passage expresses the difficulty of giving form to an absence of desire, the repeated negations that Houser identifies in the novel also suggest a more active inhabiting of this absence (631-632).

This affective flattening is also visible in the narrator’s recurring reflections on duration and stasis. At several moments, she does not describe herself as actively deciding, but rather as waiting, or allowing time to pass: “I am just waiting out my days until my childbearing years have passed, and I can make good decisions again” (Heti, 2018, 212). This passivity is not framed as harmonious; it suggests instead a form of temporal suspension in which action is continuously postponed and where ambivalent thoughts continue to compete. This passivity is also echoed in her desire to “stretch out” time, to “stroll with nowhere to go”, and to occupy “the largest parcels of time in which to do nothing” (Heti, 2018, 170). While this appears as a rejection of external pressures, it also signals an attempt to inhabit time in a way that resists decision-making itself. However, as Houser observes, the narrator’s “wondering itself is on a timer”: although she can prolong her uncertainty, the biological limits of reproduction will ultimately impose an endpoint on this state of suspension (629). Time therefore functions paradoxically in *Motherhood*: it provides a space in which the necessity of answering can be temporarily suspended, while simultaneously bringing the narrator closer to the point at which a decision will no longer be hers to make.

Alongside tarot readings and the *I Ching* consultations, the narrator encounters two messages in fortune cookies which momentarily comfort her in her decision to passively wait for the answer to reveal itself: “One said, *Stop searching. Happiness will find you*. The other said, *Your future will be harmonious*. [...] maybe I don’t need to be doing as much as I have been doing, on the level of trying to push my life down one path or another” (Heti, 2018, 124). These messages echo the language of self-help culture, particularly its emphasis on positive thinking, where positive thoughts attract positive events and manifest desires (Latham et al., 4). Yet their effect is ambivalent: while they temporarily reassure the narrator and relieve her from the pressure to make a decision, they also reinforce her tendency to postpone it; they offer the illusion of guidance while ultimately leading her to another impasse. Fortune cookies thus reproduce the logic of self-help discourse in an especially simplified form, reducing complex existential dilemmas into reassuring dictums. Their affective function is therefore similarly ambivalent: they provide temporary comfort rather than transformation, thereby

reinforcing the broader critique of self-help hermeneutics as a system that promises self-knowledge while potentially reproducing ambivalence.

The narrator also introduces a form of detachment by arguing, at one point, that “The reason you can’t find an answer, whenever you can’t, is because the answer doesn’t matter much, in the general course of things. If something can be debated endlessly and without resolution, it *cannot* matter.” (Heti, 2018, 177). This statement does not resolve the dilemma but, once again, suspends its stakes. By minimizing the importance of the decision, the indifference the narrator creates then coexists with the ongoing presence of the question. Besides, this continuous questioning leads to lassitude. In one passage, she writes: “I feel too tired to keep writing this – drained, depressed, worn through. Thinking about children weakens my fingers, and puts me in a deep sleep” (Heti, 2018, 182). This statement foregrounds exhaustion, to a point where she feels unable to “keep writing”.

At the same time, this detached temporality and affect exists in tension with the external pressures that frame reproductive time as limited and urgent. The narrator finds herself confronted with the realization that “time is running out” (Heti, 2018, 194). References to the “ticking” of time (Heti, 2018, 194), to the lack of time – “I do not have the luxury to have a child. I do not have the time” (Heti, 2018, 200) – and to the pressure to reach a “finish line” (Heti, 2018, 181) reintroduce a linear, forward-moving temporality that urges her into taking a decision. However, these reminders of temporal limitations do not function as “moments of vision” that produce a decisive shift toward action, but are absorbed into the same flattened affective register, leading to the same cycle of indecision. The coexistence of these two temporal logics produces a constant ambivalence: while the structure of the text allows for indefinite return to uncertainty, the conditions of reproductive time impose a limit that cannot be deferred indefinitely.

7.3. Fragmentation, Recursion, and Agitated Affects

While the cyclical temporality of *Motherhood* produces a flattened and suspended relation to time, the text's fragmented and recursive form gives rise to a different, more agitated affective experience. The same question is not simply repeated, but returns through different reflections, producing a sense of agitation that disturbs the possibility of uninterrupted reflection. The narrator expresses irritation, anxiety, and self-directed frustration toward her inability to change or decide. While the affects presented here complicate Ngai’s definition of ugly feelings as characterized by low intensity, they do align with the other features of the concept, particularly blocked agency and non-catharsis, as the agitation they produce does not lead to decisive action.

This agitation is thus tied to the text’s looping movement, in which the narrator’s wondering undergoes the same questions and doubts. However, each reflection carries slight changes in tone, typographical emphasis, or context, which accumulate into a growing sense of impatience. The narrator cannot answer the question of motherhood and becomes

increasingly aware of her own inability to move beyond it. This reflexive awareness transforms repetition into a source of irritation, as the narrator faces herself as someone who is stuck. A particularly illustrating moment occurs when she rereads an earlier journal entry and recognizes the persistence of her uncertainty:

> I just read over a journal from a year ago and it could have been written today. NOTHING but NOTHING has changed! How maddening! After years of thinking whether I want a baby, and writing hundreds of thousands of words thinking about it, I am in pretty much the same place, my feelings about it more or less unchanged; reason, thought, examining my desire, has brought me no closer to knowing. (Heti, 2018, 190)

What distinguishes this passage from earlier instances of repetition is the tonal change through the shift to capital letters, which constitutes the only outburst in the book. The capitalization of "nothing" introduces a sudden intensity that contrasts sharply with the more subdued affective states described in the previous section. Formally, the word interrupts the flow of the sentence, functioning almost as an outburst embedded within reflection. This typographical emphasis signals exasperation: the narrator is no longer only observing the persistence of her indecision but reacting against it. This fragment can be connected to the one analyzed hereabove in Section One, where I said that the feeling of being stuck in the same cycle created emptiness in the narrator. The difference in reaction here demonstrates that certain realizations function as "moments of vision", where emotional flatness turns into frustration, or even anger. However, the effect of these so-called "moments of vision" is short-lived and does not function as momentums to finally reach a decision. Rather, like external pressures, they are absorbed by overwhelming doubts and uncertainties.

This agitated looping is reinforced by the text's fragmented form, which disrupts the possibility of sustained argumentative or narrative development. The use of sometimes short segments, separated visually by the tilde, produces a writing experience marked by interruption and abrupt shifts in focus. For instance, a reflection on motherhood, gender, and male privilege is abruptly interrupted a mundane observation: "But I don't want to be a passageway through which a man might come, then manifest himself in the world however he likes, without anyone doubting his right. ~ There are squirrels in the walls, or mice there." (Heti, 2018, 159). Rather than allowing ideas to unfold progressively, the text repeatedly interrupts one line of thought with another, returning to earlier concerns only later and from a different angle. This movement contributes to a sense of restlessness, as if the narrator's thoughts were unable to settle. While cyclical temporality in Section One maintains ambivalent thoughts over time, fragmentation here disrupts reflection at the moment of writing.

In addition to recursive reflection and typographical disruption, the text also incorporates dream sequences that further blur the narrator's decision and complicates her affective experience. These dreams interrupt the flow of reflection and present a range of often contradictory scenarios. In some instances, the narrator imagines an idealized child:

“Last night, I dreamed that Miles and I had a little boy. He was three or four years old. Very sweet and nice, ordinary little boy” (Heti, 2018, 129). That sort of dream momentarily stages a coherent and emotionally appealing version of motherhood. Yet even in these moments, a sense of distance persists: “I felt a bit distant from him, a little bit alienated.” (Heti, 2018, 20). She may feel detached from the child or interact with it in ways that appear awkward or unfamiliar, suggesting a lack of identification with the maternal role. Alongside these idealized visions, some dreams give form to anxieties, such as temporal anxiety when she encounters women at the end of their reproductive years and fears to have a delayed, urgent desire for a child. In other cases, the dreams explicitly deal with decision-making, as when the narrator is told that her baby is coming and rushes to consult an oracle to ask whether it is too late to choose motherhood – only to be reassured that it is not. Often disconnected from the surrounding narrative, these dreams reinforce the text’s fragmentation while producing affective contradictions. They do not unveil a hidden truth about the narrator’s desires, but reveal other perspectives to the narrator and contribute to the persistence of uncertainty.

This fragmentation is also evident in the way the narrator incorporates her repeated consultations of external systems of decision-making, most notably the *I Ching*, into the narrative. These consultations are presented as distinct textual units within her personal reflections: the narrator poses a question, records the *I Ching*’s answer, and then returns to her own interpretation of it. Although these responses appear to interrupt the flow of her reflections by introducing new elements to her deliberations, they ultimately become part of the same recursive movement: each answer generates other interrogations and interpretations, thereby often creating further uncertainty rather than resolution. The repetition of this process of question, answer, and interpretation reinforces the sense of agitation, as the narrator regularly seeks external authority that fails to provide clarity.

Unlike previous examples, not all instances of fragmentation produce agitated affects. In some cases, formal disruption coincides with a temporary stabilization of the narrator’s emotional state. This is for instance evident in the tarot reading scene (Heti, 2018, 141-150) which, despite its marked formal fragmentation, does not generate irritation or anxiety but rather a contained form of attention. This scene is characterized by typographical shifts, most notably the inversion of italics, where the narrator’s voice becomes italicized and the psychic’s voice appears in regular type, as well as by the insertion of visual representations of the tarot cards. Rather than expressing frustration or impatience, the narrator adopts a receptive posture, answering the psychic’s questions and allowing the reading to progress. The shift in typography renders the psychic voice dominant and temporarily suspends the narrator’s self-questioning. Instead of generating new doubts, the scene channels the narrator’s constant reflection through a structured interaction in which interpretation is temporarily directed by another voice. Consequently, fragmentation here creates a space that contrasts with the otherwise restless or indifferent dynamic of the text.

The tarot reading also responds to the logic of self-help and therapeutic discourse, in which external frameworks are used to render one's life more understandable and to guide decision-making. Yet the apparent authority of this structure remains unstable, such as when the psychic asks whether the narrator was able to ask her mother for what she needed as a child: "Were you able to ask for what you needed from your mother, as a little girl? *I don't think so.* What about what you ate as a girl? *Cheddar cheese and chicken soup?*", prompting the psychic to admit, "I'm not understanding" and to turn instead to the crystal ball: "Okay, hold on. Turning the ball..." (Heti, 2018, 146). The exchange moves from an apparently therapeutic question to an absurd answer and then to the theatrical invocation of another source of knowledge, the crystal ball, introducing a moment of randomness into the reading. This moment should not, however, be taken as representative of the entire exchange, which also contains more serious attempts at interpretation: "There is something in you that knows how to keep walking, but something's stopping you. And what is stopping you is... grief" (Heti, 2018, 143). Rather than completely parodying or rejecting self-help and therapeutic modes of interpretation, the tarot scene thus places their promise of meaningful insight alongside moments in which the production of meaning appears arbitrary. Once the reading ends, the narrator does not return to assess or reflect on the consultation itself, suggesting that its significance lies more in the temporality structuring of her reflections than in providing a definite answer.

The agitated affects that are generally produced by fragmentation and reflective recursion do not replace the flatness described in the previous section; the two coexist and interact. Moments of irritation emerge out of prolonged states of suspension, just as exhaustion can follow from repeated cycles of frustration. The text thus constantly oscillates between these different affective intensities, without stabilizing into a single dominant mood. Fragmentation and recursion play a role in this oscillation, enabling the sudden shifts in tone and affect. This constant tension between agitated affects and emotional flatness creates a pervasive ambivalence, leading to inhibiting affects. While emotional flatness and agitation generally emerge from the narrator's interior reflections, the inhibiting affects explored in the following section often emerge both through her anxieties surrounding the tension between motherhood and artistic creation and through interactions with other people.

7. 4. Writing, Reproduction, and Inhibiting Affects

If the macro-structure of *Motherhood* establishes a cyclical temporality, it also progressively reframes the central dilemma – whether or not to have a child – through an analogy between biological reproduction and artistic creation. Throughout the text, writing emerges as an alternative to motherhood and a competing form of fulfillment, which challenges the myth that a woman can never truly be complete and happy if she does not have children. However, her opinion on this alternative is rarely steady; it generates a series of inhibiting affects, such as guilt, self-doubt, and shame, which prevent the narrator from fully maintaining either position. Even though the narrator considers writing to be at times

enough to fulfill her, the text ultimately does not present a stable conclusion as far as the choice between art and motherhood is concerned. It foregrounds instead an ongoing tension in which both appear insufficient, which produces constant ambivalence.

From the beginning, the narrator explicitly places writing at the heart of her life, describing it as the "central relationship" of her life (Heti, 2018, 93). This fundamental position of writing is reinforced through metaphors that compare artistic production with biological reproduction. At one point, the psychic giving her a tarot reading catches a glimpse of her producing "glowing, beautiful pieces of fruit" (Heti, 2018, 150). This formulation hints at motherhood, but also implicitly recasts the book she is writing as a form of offspring. This analogy is further developed in a reflection on temporality, where she contrasts motherhood with art:

> What is wrong with living your life for a mother, instead of a son or daughter? There can be nothing wrong in it. If my desire is to write, and for the writing to defend, and for the defence to really live – not just for one day, but for a thousand days, or ten thousand days – that is no less viable a human aspiration than having a child with your mind set on eternity. Art is eternity backwards. Art is written for one's ancestors [...]. We write for them. Children are eternity forwards. My sense of eternity is backwards through time. (Heti, 2018, 120)

This distinction reveals that, while she perceives motherhood as projecting the self into a linear, future-oriented temporality, writing turns according to her inward and backward, suggesting a recursive engagement with experience rather than its extension into futurity. While writing can also be produced for posterity, Thomas argues that "the text writes backwards in time" to repair the intergenerational trauma; she attempts to repair the problems inherited from the past "rather than reproducing them in the present" (2019, 64; 82). The opposition between art and motherhood is thus thematic but also temporal, reinforcing the broader tension in the text between forward movement and cyclical return. It also reveals how a woman who does not wish to have children imagines a different relation to futurity, one that is not focused on the future of one's children but instead follows its creative desires. Furthermore, she directly challenges the myths of motherhood by confronting the socio-cultural demand imposed on women to happily sacrifice themselves and live their life for their children.

Yet this alternative model of creation does not provide a stable solution. Although writing is at times endowed with a therapeutic function – "This will be a book to prevent future tears – to prevent me and my mother from crying. [...] I can heal us both with my words" (Heti, 2018, 16) – its capacity to resolve the narrator's uncertainty is repeatedly undermined. The text initially frames itself as a kind of instrument that might produce clarity, even a decision. However, this expectation is ultimately frustrated, as the act of writing becomes the very mechanism that sustains ambivalence:

> In the early days of writing this book, I thought it would be a trick: that I would write it and it would tell me whether I wanted to have a child. You think you are creating a trick with your art, but your art ends up tricking you. It made me write it and write it for years. [...] the promise of an answer just around the corner, maybe in the next day's writing. But that day never came. (Heti, 2018, 272-273)

This passage presents writing as a delayed promise, aligned with the cyclical temporality outlined earlier. The anticipated resolution, the "answer", is continuously postponed, producing a dynamic of expectation without fulfillment. The repetition of temporal markers such as "early days", "for years", and "the next day" reinforces this sense of duration without progress. Moreover, the metaphor of the "trick" suggests a reversal of agency: rather than being the agent in the process, the narrator is caught within it and realizes she became a passive subject. However, this postponement is not necessarily only inhibiting, as the absence of an answer also allows the process of writing to continue. Buurma et al., in their discussion of Heti's other novel, *How Should a Person Be?*, argue that her writing focuses on the process of producing a work rather than on the completed work itself, so that "the preparation for writing the work in fact slowly and over time comes to constitute the work" (88). Although their analysis concerns another of Heti's novels, it offers a useful perspective on *Motherhood*: the narrator's inability to reach a definitive answer does not stop the writing process but becomes one of its conditions. Writing thus both prolongs her ambivalence and gives it a form, turning the unresolved question into an ongoing source of textual production.

This failure of writing to provide closure is accompanied by a set of inhibiting affects that complicate the narrator's relationship to both art and motherhood. One of the most persistent of these is guilt, which emerges in response to the perceived inadequacy of writing when compared to motherhood. As the narrator reflects, "Writing seems so small in comparison to motherhood. It doesn't feel like it will fill up all the nooks and crannies of the soul" (Heti, 2018, 187). Her sense of inadequacy does not arise solely from an internal judgment of writing but from standardized hierarchies that privilege reproductive labor over artistic creation. Even as she resists these norms, she remains affected by them, unable to fully dismiss the stereotype that motherhood represents a more complete or meaningful form of existence.

This tension is also shaped through repeated encounters with people who interpret her uncertainty according to the expectation thar she will eventually become a mother. For instance, a writer she meets transforms her uncertainty into a predictable path towards motherhood: "this other writer, Adam, said he thought all my questioning about whether to have children would finally lead me to having a child. When I asked why, he said, *You're going to be too curious not to*" (Heti, 2018, 94). A similar assumption appears when another woman tells her about her forty-five-year-old daughter, who had once been uncertain about having children but eventually married a woman who wanted children and "now she loves being a mother" (Heti, 2018, 94). In both cases, the narrator's questioning in interpreted not as an open-ended inquiry but as a stage preceding the supposedly inevitable discovery of maternal

desire. This internalization becomes explicit when she reflects on how "unfair" it is that she and another woman "had to think about having kids" and felt that "if we didn't have children, *we would always regret it*" (Heti, 2018, 90). The italicization of the last part is meaningful here: although presented as an external expectation, the possibility of future regret has become part of the narrator's own thought process. Social pressure thus operates through direct recommendations to have children, but also through the internalization of anticipated regret, reflecting the myth of maternal fulfillment in which having children is the greatest source of happiness in a woman's life.

Yet the social interactions presented in *Motherhood* do not uniformly reinforce the expectation of motherhood. The narrator also encounters women who question the assumption that motherhood constitutes the only meaningful form of a woman's adult life. At a writers' festival, for instance, a woman observes that the first question women of their age ask about one another is whether they have children and, if not, whether they intend to have them: "*It's like civil war: Which side are you on?*" (Heti, 2018, 90). The metaphor of "war" and "sides" exposes the oppositional structure through which reproductive choices are socially understood, but the narrator also encounters perspectives that disrupts this binary. A pregnant woman tells her, "*This is not the only life I could have had. I could have made a different choice. It's not necessary to be a mother – it's just one thing*" (Heti, 2019, 91). Such encounters offer an alternative to the dominant narrative of motherhood as inevitable or necessary, yet they do not resolve the narrator's ambivalence. Indeed, social interactions become occasions for comparison and self-evaluation, producing contradictory and inhibiting affects. When she notes feeling both "better" than a friend who has become a mother and "ashamed" (Heti, 2018, 134), the text captures a dynamic where superiority and shame emerge together. Their coexistence leads to a lack of resolution, thereby aligning with Sianne Ngai's concept of ugly feelings as non-cathartic, "amoral" affects that linger without producing resolution.

The tension between writing and motherhood is thus shaped by an internalized evaluative voice that reflects social norms. Throughout the text, the narrator's reflections are structured by implicit "shoulds": she should want children, she should find fulfillment in motherhood, she should make a decision before it is "too late." These normative expectations mirror the tone of self-help discourse, which often frames life choices in terms of optimization, self-realization, and correct decision-making. These internalized norms generate guilt and self-doubt, as the narrator measures herself against an idealized standard of womanhood and repeatedly finds herself lacking, whether she imagines choosing motherhood or rejecting it: "What if I pursue being a bad women and don't breed – pursue failing biologically?" (Heti, 2018, 113); "She asked me to go and sit with the baby [...]. I watched the baby as best I could, but felt edgy" (Heti, 2018, 133). This self-evaluation produces a form of affective inhibition: instead of enabling action, it reinforces her inability to decide.

This tension between resisting and internalizing normative expectations can be understood through the figure of Ahmed's "feminist killjoy", insofar as the narrator disrupts the dominant association between motherhood and fulfillment. However, *Motherhood* complicates this figure by showing that challenging a normative script does not necessarily mean becoming detached from it. Rather than confidently rejecting reproductive norms, the narrator experiences her refusal as heavy, marked by guilt, anxiety, and persistent self-questioning. Her refusal produces a heightened awareness of social expectations and one's failure to meet them or difficulty of escaping them. This is evident in her reflection on the figure of the "ideal woman": "Will I win at being the perfect woman if I have children? will I win at being an ideal woman if I do not?" (Heti, 2018, 224). The framing of the question in terms of "winning" underscores how femininity remains experienced as a normative framework that women try to adjust to, rather than being able to completely reject it. The narrator therefore occupies an unstable position between rejecting the expectations attached to motherhood and continuing to measure herself against them.

By experiencing self-doubt, the narrator repeatedly questions whether her resistance to motherhood is genuine or the result of repression: "What if I've suppressed my desire for children so much that my desire is unrecognizable to me?" (Heti, 2018, 83-84). This question exposes a form of uncertainty that undermines her own authority over her desires. Similarly, the tension between body and mind produces a division within the self that prevents any stable decision from emerging:

> Why is my body doing this inside me every month, and how many opportunities could I miss? How stupid am I really? How little I care for what it wants. How neglected and abandoned this little animal inside me that is doing its work so diligently and well [...]. It has no idea I need nothing from it. [...] Who is it doing all this for, if not for me? And what do I do for *it*? [...] I never feel grateful." (Heti, 2018, 151)

These moments illustrate how ambivalence operates as a condition in which competing entities cannot be reconciled. By turning her body through metaphor into a neglected and abandoned animal, the narrator experiences guilt when feeling like her mind is working against her body, disregarding its wishes and never giving it appreciation. By writing "it" in italics, she also separates herself from her body, as if speaking about an estranged entity, exhibiting further the division in her self. At times, she experiences even more than ambivalence and feels like her body is betraying her, such as when the fertility clinic announces to her that her ovaries are young and in perfect health: "I burst into tears. How could my body betray me in this way? Didn't it know anything about us – about what I truly desired?" (Heti, 2018, 127).

Guilt and self-doubt are not the only inhibiting affects experienced in *Motherhood*. They overlap with shame, emerging from social interactions where she feels judged. The strongest occurrence of shame appears during the only other medical appointment in the

novel, where she is confronted with the risks of her contraception choice, while remaining unsure of her reproductive choice:

> This afternoon, I went to my doctor. She did a check-up, then asked me questions about my life, including what sort of contraception Miles and I were using. I grew embarrassed, admitting the truth: pulling out. It was what I had used with almost every man. *What if you get pregnant? Would you be okay with that?* I tried to answer in an easy way, but soon my sentences got twisted up. (Heti, 2018, 28)

The narrator's inability to respond coherently reflects the obstructing effect of shame but also her uncertainty, as her speech becomes fragmented under the pressure of normative expectations. The use of italics to distinguish the doctor's voice emphasizes the asymmetry of the interaction, positioning medical discourse as an authoritative framework that the narrator struggles to face.

Ultimately, the analogy between reproduction and writing does not resolve the narrator's dilemma but intensifies its temporal contradictions. Writing becomes both a substitute for and a reminder of what is at stake in the decision not to have a child. While it offers a moment of suspension – a "cocoon where time stands still" (Heti, 2018, 228) –, this stasis is ultimately deceptive, as it does not eliminate the pressures associated with reproductive temporality. It instead coexists with them and produces an experience in which different temporalities and affective states overlap. This again echoes Houser's observation that "wondering itself is on a timer" (629), meaning that the temporal space – the "cocoon" -– opened up by writing remains constrained by the biological limits of reproduction. Therefore, the result is not a clear opposition between art and motherhood but a continuous tension in which both are experienced as incomplete. Writing is productive in the sense that it can provide a temporary escape from reproductive time, but it cannot offer an alternative to it. In that sense, in addition to representing ambivalence, the text constructs it through the interaction of form, temporality, and affect.

The ending of the text further complicates the dynamic of ambivalent wondering. Rather than arriving at a clear, active decision, the narrator allows time to resolve the question for her. She does not actively choose to remain childless but reaches a point where having children is no longer possible. Yet this outcome is accompanied not by regret but by relief, even liberation: "I managed to pass through my childbearing years without bearing a child. It really feels like a miracle. […] I didn't know whether I would make it – but now there is relief inside." (Heti, 2018, 272). The word "miracle" offers a spiritual imagery, echoing the divinatory practices she has used in her journey of wondering, such as the *I Ching* and the tarot readings, which have however not led to a decisive answer. The narrator's relief therefore emerges from the fact that the question has ceased to require an answer as biological time has closed off the possibility of choice.

The absence of a decisive moment challenges the expectations associated with self-help hermeneutics, which typically frame transformation as the result of personal effort and

self-knowledge. The narrator herself explicitly distinguishes her final, more appeased affective state with the role of medication, which complicates the novel's engagement with therapeutic practices. Importantly, the narrator only turns to medication toward the end of the narrative, after years of attempting to understand and regulate her feelings through introspection and various systems of interpretation. Before taking medication, she explicitly resists the idea of relying on it: "I don't want [...] to need to be medicated in order to live – to admit there's something inside me that cannot be helped through will alone" (Heti, 2018, 231). Her resistance reflects the same ideal of self-management that underlies self-help discourse: the expectation that difficulties should be overcome through individual effort and that the self should be capable of regulating itself (Riley et al., 5-6; Woodstock, 325). Yet the persistence of her distress eventually leads her to reconsider this position; she acknowledges that she cannot continue "spending half the month crumpled in tears" and considers speaking to her doctor (Heti, 2018, 231). Although the medical consultation itself remains outside the narrative, the subsequent passages establish that she does begin taking medication.

The effects are presented as strikingly different from the temporary relief produced by her previous attempts at self-interpretation. Walking home, she experiences the world as "bright and joyous" before realizing that "it was the drugs kicking in" (Heti, 2018, 240). She subsequently describes the drugs as allowing her to "return" to the world, as the "fear" and "anxiety" that has previously dominated her experience begin to subside (Heti, 2018, 242). The contrast she draws between medication and her earlier attempts at self-transformation is particularly revealing: "I had wanted to whisk them away, but I wanted to do [it] by old-fashioned means – means that didn't work – delving into my past, religion, spirituality, dreams – not by modern means, which are easy, and work" (Heti, 2018, 241). The "old-fashioned" practices she lists recall the novel's repeated use of the *I Ching* and other interpretive practices through which she has sought an answer to her reproductive dilemma. Medication therefore introduces a completely different approach to affect, acting directly on the intensity and nature of her feelings rather than interpreting their source.

Yet the narrator does not simply celebrate this effectiveness. The drugs also unsettle her understanding of what gives her feelings and writing legitimacy. She worries she does not "have the right to speak anymore" and admits:

> I can't pretend I have come to any answers, or any great wisdom. I think the drugs are the reason I am feeling less bad [...]. All these years, when I had been leaning on epiphanies to make me feel better, the feeling would last for ten minutes, or a day, but it wouldn't really change anything. Am I annoyed? Am I disappointed? A little bit, yes. I wanted my own magic to get rid of the pain. (Heti, 2018, 242)

This hesitation reveals the extent to which she has internalized the expectation that emotional improvement should result from personal insight. Medication consequently both alleviates the affects that have sustained her wondering – and her writing – and threatens to undermine her sense of herself as a legitimate narrator of that experience. Her comment that

she had wanted her "own magic to get rid of the pain" is particularly significant in this respect: the medication works precisely where her attempts at self-interpretation have not, and its efficacy also deprives her of the sense that she has personally discovered the answer to her wondering.

Medication introduces thus an alternative form of "therapy" that operates outside the logic of introspective writing. While the text engages with therapeutic writing as a potential means of achieving clarity, it ultimately suggests its limitations. Writing does not resolve ambivalence but sustains it, while, conversely, pharmaceutical intervention provides a form of affective stabilization. This is not to say that writing has not been therapeutic; it does enable the narrator to both put her feelings down and improve her relationship with her mother – an aspect that has been widely discussed by Thomas (2019, 55-89) –, but it does not reach the promise of healing in this narrative. The combination of writing, self-help discourse, and medication highlights the complex ways in which the narrator navigates her emotional life. Rather than presenting a coherent model of healing or decision-making, *Motherhood* exposes the limitations of each framework.

This chapter has demonstrated that *Motherhood* reconfigures the question of reproductive choice by challenging the expectation that it should lead to a clear and actively chosen outcome. Rather than presenting a straightforward narrative of either refusal or affirmation, the text sustains uncertainty through the interaction of cyclical temporality, fragmentation, recursion, and their combined affects. The ambivalence and persistence of indecision are thus thematically but also formally embedded, as the narrator continually interrupts and redirects the movement of her thoughts. Consequently, she engages with the "memoir of becoming" which recounts the journey toward childlessness (Spurling, 842).

In terms of affect, his structure gives rise to a range of non-cathartic, often conflicting "ugly feelings" that neither lead to action nor allow for closure. Emotional flatness, agitation, inhibition, and moments of stabilization coexist without converging into a coherent emotional direction. While *Motherhood* engages with the strand of self-help literature which addresses women who experience uncertainty or ambivalence regarding motherhood, she resists its underlying logic of self-knowledge, transformation of "thoughts and feelings" (Riley et al., 6), and active decision-making. Yet the novel does not suggest that reflection produces no form of transformation. Writing allows the narrator to articulate and work through aspects of her relationship with her mother and the intergenerational trauma associated with it (Thomas, 2019, 89) – aligning in that respect with therapeutic writing –, while medication, introduced toward the end of the narrative, provides a different form of affective stabilization. The ending therefore distinguishes between feeling better, understanding oneself, and resolving the reproductive question: these processes do not necessarily coincide. The narrator can experience relief without having discovered the answer she had spent the novel seeking.

The narrator's position can consequently be understood through the figure of the feminist killjoy, but *Motherhood* also complicates this figure. Her refusal to affirm

motherhood as the inevitable source of female fulfillment remains affectively entangled in the norms she questions. Yet these difficult affects are not only inhibiting. The unresolved question also becomes a source of writing, as the uncertainty that prevents decisive action provides material for continued reflection and artistic production. The novel thus presents resistance as both affectively burdensome and creatively productive. By foregrounding this ambivalent form of refusal, *Motherhood* thus challenges the myths of natural maternal instinct and maternal fulfillment and also exposes the affective burden of deviating from them. In this respect, *Motherhood* also suggests that autofiction can provide a form through which an unsettled sense of self can be explored, aligning with Thomas' understanding of autofiction as a means of renegotiating the self after its disruption (2019, 131-132). Yet Heti's novel nuances this model by showing autofiction does not necessarily restore a stable sense of self: through fragmentation and recursion, uncertainty itself becomes the material of the text.

The narrator ultimately feels relief at no longer having to decide. The resolution of the dilemma does not emerge from insight, transformation, or so-called "moments of vision", but from the passage of time, which removes the necessity of choice. This constitutes a form of resolution, but not one based on self-knowledge or active decision-making. Her final sense of appeasement is also shaped by medication and by the healing of intergenerational trauma through writing. Motherhood therefore separates emotional relief from the achievement of a definite answer, showing how unresolvedness can become a source of narrative production.

Chapter 8 - Affect & Narrative Form in Cusk's *A Life's Work*

This chapter turns to Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* in order to examine how affect and form unsettle dominant myths of motherhood. Building on the theoretical frameworks established in previous chapters, the analysis focuses on the ways in which Cusk's account of early motherhood dismantles idealized maternal scripts, and both engages with and resists self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. Indeed, contrary to the logic of self-help and therapeutic discourses, *A Life's Work* does not offer a coherent narrative of adaptation or maternal fulfillment. The memoir foregrounds disorientation as a permanent state, in which experience cannot be stabilized into resolution or meaning. It is only when time, and with it the chaos of early motherhood, has passed that she finally feels more appeased. In a way, however, *A Life's Work* does engage with self-help and therapeutic discourses by offering mothers in the same situation a personal story to which they can relate. Cusk's book also aligns with the tradition of "motherhood memoirs", which challenge existing norms (Jones, 2024, §3) through a form that imitates the disruptiveness of their daily lives (Thomas, 2018, 80).

The chapter first analyzes the macro-structure of the text, demonstrating how its thematic organization and subtle fragmentation produce a form of narrative instability that mirrors the narrator's altered subjectivity. It then moves through three affective states: affective eruptions, affective numbness, and inhibiting affects. Each of these sections exposes how affect and form operate together to challenge dominant expectations of motherhood. Thereby, this chapter argues that *A Life's Work* exposes the "hidden" difficulties of motherhood but also depicts a continuous impossibility of affective resolution. This rejection of resolution positions the narrator as a maternal killjoy whose experience disrupts the cultural stereotype of motherhood as naturally fulfilling, while also revealing the persistent pressure of the norms she unsettles.

8.1. Narrative Structure of Maternal Disorientation

On a large scale, *A Life's Work* resists expectations of development and closure, instead offering an affectively dissonant account of early motherhood. While certain maternal narratives are characterized by an overt visual fragmentation (Thomas, 2019, 114), *A Life's Work* uses a more subtle form of discontinuity, emerging from the juxtaposition of contradictions, self-reflexive intrusions, and intertextual references – which will be explored in more details in the different sections on affective states. Consequently, fragmentation here does not operate visually at the level of layout, but at the level of thought and instability of subjectivity.

Pages are densely composed, with few formal interruptions, and the text frequently employs long, syntactically complex sentences. These extended sentences mirror the

disorganized nature of Cusk's maternal consciousness, reflecting a subjectivity that is no longer unified or stable. Rather than presenting clearly delineated thoughts, the narrative unfolds in accumulative, continuous "blocks". This style evokes the overwhelming nature of early motherhood, where the narrator struggles to make sense of its multiple demands and impressions. Rather than clarifying experience, narration becomes a site in which meaning is thought but never fully settled. Form thus portrays the disorientation it seeks to resolve, revealing in the process a fragmented self.

The text starts with an "Introduction to This Edition", added in later publications of the book, which provides a retrospective framing that contextualizes the original narrative. While it presents a form of critical distance from the backlash she received when her book was first published, suggesting an awareness of, and partial release from, the normative expectations imposed on mothers, it also reveals the persistence of these cultural pressures. This new introduction thus frames the text not as a resolved account, but as one that remains engaged in the discourses it seeks to confront: "the others [...] who accused me of being an unfit or unloving mother [...]. I didn't write it because I wanted your approval. [...] For a long time I was so disturbed by the suggestion [...] that I did not love my children that I truly regretted having written this book" (Cusk, 2019, 4-6). These sentences expose the criticism mothers receive when they express marginalized, ambivalent affects and the impact of such judgement on their self-perception.

After the "Introduction to This Edition" and the "Introduction", the narrative begins with pregnancy, which functions as a point of departure into a fundamentally altered temporality. Pregnancy introduces a temporality that diverges from chrononormative structures, featuring cycles and waiting over linear progression (Thomas, 2019, 29). However, as Thomas argued, this somatic temporality is not entirely disconnected from a linear progression, as a certain linearity remains imposed by the medical establishment (2019, 30). This temporal disruption continues into Cusk's early motherhood, where distinctions between day and night, self and child, and before motherhood and after motherhood become unstable: "Gradually the distinction between day and night dissolved entirely" (Cusk, 2019, 184).

In terms of organization, Thomas already noted that the text is structured thematically rather than chronologically, with the first chapter "Forty Weeks" being an exception (2019, 118). The chapters focus on specific experiences or discourses, rather than highlighting stages or "milestones" in a developmental direction. For instance, the chapter "Extra Fox" deals with books on motherhood, and "Help" with babysitting. Furthermore, while certain chapters are related to bodily experience, such as "Forty Weeks" or "A Valediction to Sleep" on her disrupted experience of sleep, they are not exclusively structured around the body itself. This move exposes the "doubled subjectivity" (Thomas, 2019, 119) Cusk experiences, in which the maternal self is split between her own consciousness and her constant orientation toward the child. Her life is henceforth no longer centered on herself but mostly on her baby. Even in

the chapters dedicated to bodily experiences, the physicality she expresses revolves around the impression that her body is no longer hers, but a machine used for procreation and care: “The baby sucks; the machinery springs into action; milk is magically produced. [...] As the baby grows, the mother shrinks” (Cusk, 2019, 100).

Although a minimal chronological progression is present – most notably with the growth of the child from pregnancy onwards – the narrative challenges linear models of development through this altered temporality structured around the mother’s lived experience. Furthermore, certain chapters such as “Motherbaby” on breastfeeding consist mostly in the early days with her daughter, creating a flashback compared to the last chapters. The text thereby resists the logic of progress associated with therapeutic and self-help frameworks, in which difficulty is expected to culminate in adaptation and self-understanding. Instead, Cusk presents a form of temporal disjunction in which affect does not develop according to narrative time: temporality resists the linear development of the child and affect remains recursive and unresolved.

8.2. Affective Eruptions

In *A Life’s Work*, Rachel Cusk repeatedly introduces moments of affective eruption, characterized by instances of anxiety, panic, anger, and crying, and which occur both in private and public settings. I chose the term “eruption” because such moment punctures the so-called “mask of motherhood” (Kinser, 123) and contrasts strongly with the general atmosphere of unsentimentality that will be explored in the next section. These eruptions constitute a central strategy through which the text dismantles dominant myths of motherhood, particularly those of the “happy mother” and the “natural mother” which promote the expectation that maternal experience is fulfilling and instinctive. By articulating these affects, the text aligns with the growing trend of motherhood memoirs, which position themselves as alternative narratives to idealized cultural scripts (Fahlgren et al., 136; Thomas, 2019, 21). These heightened and agitated affects are also formal: they are registered through rhythmic acceleration and abrupt tonal shifts. In this way, affect and narrative form converge to resist both idealized maternal scripts and the logic of self-help and therapeutic writing discourses, which typically seek to render experience intelligible and manageable.

One of the most striking features of these affective eruptions is their suddenness. Emotional states do not gradually develop but appear as abrupt agitations, often within the same setting. Returning home after the birth of her child, the narrator describes a sudden and disorienting shift from domestic familiarity to claustrophobic entrapment:

> Minutes later the same rooms, the same possessions arouse in me a terrible panic, the panic of confinement. A violent anger seizes me at the sight of them; I recoil from their closeness as if in dislike. I feel burdened with secrets; an adulterous desire sets me apart from myself, fills me with both longing and revulsion for that which I have betrayed. I cannot explain those feelings. Instead I sit on the sofa and cry. (Cusk, 2019, 57)

In this passage, the repetition of “the same” underscores the external stability of the environment, against which Cusk’s internal upheaval appears irrational. The accumulation of short sentences, contrasting with the long and essayistic sentences that are more typical of the text, produces a rhythm that mimics the sudden change in her affective state and the fragmentation of panic. Her inability to explain her feelings opposes the framework of therapeutic writing, which promises emotional clarity and regulation. On the contrary, Cusk emphasizes emotional confusion. The references to “violent anger” and “adulterous desire” also hint at an unconventional dimension in her emotions. Rather than turning affect into meaning, the act of crying that concludes the passage is not cathartic but marks the limit of understanding. This refusal or failure of explanation is central to Cusk's challenge to both maternal myths and self-help hermeneutics. Whereas self-help discourse promises clarity, and supposedly offer mothers tools to interpret and regulate their emotions, Cusk foregrounds an affect that resists this expectation. The home, conventionally portrayed as a site of comfort and maternal fulfillment, is reconstructed as a space of imprisonment and estrangement. This sensation of imprisonment inside her own home comes back multiple times, for instance when she has to watch over her daughter: “I become confined to one room” (Cusk, 2019, 143). Therefore, the narrator occupies the position of the maternal killjoy: while her negative affect expresses personal distress, it also disrupts the cultural fantasy of motherhood as a source of happiness.

These eruptions are not limited to moments of solitude and disorientation but emerge most forcefully in the relation between mother and child. The baby’s crying, in particular, functions as a recurring affective trigger that precipitates states of agitation, placing the mother into a temporality of urgency: “The baby’s cries are so deafening, so urgent, so redolent of emergency” (Cusk, 2019, 67). In one scene, the narrator recounts how, awakened at night by her daughter’s cries, she begins to shout:

> Then, next door, she cries. I begin to shout. I don’t quite know what I am shouting, something about it being unfair, about it clearly being completely unreasonable that I should want FIVE MINUTES on my own. GO TO SLEEP! I shout, now standing directly over her cradle. […] Eventually she goes to sleep, silently, submissively, declining my help. Her withdrawal from me fills me with shame; the sleep itself, so longed for, is unbearable. I want to wake her up, proffering love. (Cusk, 2019, 85-86)

The typographical shift into capital letters visually marks an emotional outburst and a loss of control in the otherwise measured prose. Yet this moment of anger is immediately wiped out and replaced by shame, giving rise instead to a contradictory desire to wake the child again. The passage thus foregrounds unstable emotional movements and ambivalence, with a rapid oscillation between incompatible affects – rage, relief, shame, longing –, none of which can be constant. This fluctuation undermines the ideal of the 'good mother’: the ‘self-sacrificing mother’ is imagined as patient, selfless, and responsive, but Cusk, by contrast, is caught in a tempest of affective shifts that she cannot control. In addition, the passage exposes how

these ideals continue to exert pressure. The experience of shame signals the internalization of normative expectations: the narrator perceives her anger as a failure to embody the maternal ideal. Such an outburst of anger and impatience marked by capital letters occurs only twice more in the book – one of which will be analyzed in the following paragraphs –, thereby exposing the effort to maintain the "mask of motherhood" (Kinser, 123).

Formally, these moments are marked by discontinuity rather than development. Emotional states do not lead to insight or resolution but overlap, producing a sense of affective impasse. This is particularly evident in scenes of public disarray, where agitation is expressed through a syntactic shift toward a series of loosely connected clauses, without clear hierarchy or pause, creating a sense of acceleration and overload. Actions are not organized into a coherent sequence but accumulate, mirroring the narrator's loss of control:

> I try to pack the baby back into her pouch, and I do it clumsily and unconfidently, and suddenly she starts to cry, to scream with an extraordinary, primitive anguish; I am in disarray, knocking over coffee cups, fumbling with change, trying to speak, to pacify, to explain, holding the baby this way and that in the drenching rain and finally running through the park, the empty pouch flapping at my front, the roaring baby held out before me like something on fire, my friend trotting embarrassed behind, until we reach the road and madly, desperately, I flag down a taxi and somehow force the chaos of us into it (Cusk, 2019, 61-62)

In this excerpt, temporality is experienced as an intensification: time compresses under the pressure of competing demands, which produces a present that is both urgent and unmanageable. The baby's crying draws the narrator into an affect that is difficult to regulate or escape, turning into an agitation that is rooted in the temporal structure of maternal care. The repetition of the same idea with different words such as "madly", "desperately", as well as the accumulation of verbs, adjectives, and nouns, reveals her difficulty to make sense of what she is feeling, adding instead several sensations. Besides, the presence of the friend, following passively behind, hints at a gap in understanding between non-maternal and maternal experience, a dimension that will be further developed in Chapter Nine, where the perspectives of a non-mother and a mother are read together.

Affective eruptions are expressed not only in relational dynamics with her daughter, but also as a reaction to public comments, exposing the central role social expectations play in motherhood. When her child cries, she often receives remarks from other people that she is probably hungry, implying that Cusk should feed her. In addition to the exasperation Cusk already feels regarding the exhaustion of constantly feeding her daughter and having the impression that she always does something wrong, these comments consist sometimes of the ultimate trigger: "Sometimes the baby cries even *while* she is feeding and I feel the triumphal urge to call a symposium. There! I would say to everyone. What do you say to THAT?" (Cusk, 2019, 109). The passage illustrates the social expectations imposed on mothers and their internalization. Although the comments come from people who have no knowledge of Cusk's daily experience, their judgment is sufficiently familiar and internalized that she anticipates

and mentally rehearses a response to it. By imagining a “symposium” over the baby’s crying, Cusk transforms this trivial maternal incident into a kind of public trial in which she demonstrates that she has fulfilled her maternal responsibilities. The adjective “triumphal” similarly exaggerates the significance of proving that the baby’s crying persists despite being fed, emphasized by the italic typography of “while”. The “There!” and the capitalized “THAT” stage a moment in which she finally forces her imagined audience to acknowledge that their judgment is wrong. The narrator thus momentarily imagines triumphing over those who have judged her, but the very need to stage this imagined defense reveals how deeply the expectation of maternal competence and the pressure of maternal scrutiny have been internalized.

Finally, form conveys at times the imminent arrival of an affective outburst, for instance when Cusk has the impression that she is constantly feeding her daughter and can never have time for herself: “At this point I don’t just *want* her to go to sleep. She *has* to go to sleep otherwise I don’t know what will happen” (Cusk, 2019, 85). While capital letters express the emotional outburst, the italic typography signals that the narrator is at the edge of losing control of her emotions, expressing the urgent need for her daughter to fall asleep. Both typographical emphases thus indicate moments of mounting intensity in the narrator’s affect.

The emotional outbursts in *A Life’s Work* thus function as formal and affective upheavals that unveil the instability of maternal subjectivity. Through sudden shifts in typography, rhythm, and syntax, this agitation compromises the coherence of maternal adaption or fulfillment, and instead foregrounds affect as overwhelming and tangled. The intensity of these heightened states becomes unsustainable, giving way to a contrasting affective state marked by emotional depletion and detachment. It is this transition from agitation to exhaustion that the next section examines through the lens of affective numbness.

8.3. Affective Numbness

While *A Life’s Work* is punctuated by moments of affective eruption and agitation, these do not accumulate toward catharsis or coherence. They often give way to a contrasting affective state: numbness. Anxiety, frustration, anger, and sadness exhaust the narrator, and produce a tone of detachment that is characterized by indifference and flatness. This affective shift complicates any reading of Cusk’s text as an unsentimental and unloving account that is simply exposing the “hidden” negative emotions of motherhood. Rather, it suggests a more ambivalent dynamic in which the intensity of the different and tangled feelings she experiences becomes unsustainable, giving way to a form of emotional withdrawal. As in the previous section, this affective state is inseparable from narrative form and temporality: numbness is articulated through a flattening tone, declarative statements, and a suspension of narrative movement that resists the emotional joy and fulfillment typically associated with maternal experience in the cultural scripts.

This numbness manifests itself in two interconnected ways: first, in the narrator's estrangement from the expected emotional bond with her daughter; and second, in the flattening of affect through repetitive care, altered temporality, and the absence of narrative progression. This section thus first examines this emotional estrangement through the narrator's representations of the baby, while also considering the ambivalence of her unsentimentality, as Cusk also presents moments of maternal attachment. It then turns to repetitive maternal care and altered temporality, examining how the experience of caring for the baby contributes to the narrator's affective numbness. Finally, it considers flattened affect as a resistance to resolution and transformation, connecting Cusk's narrative to self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing.

The first feature of this affective numbness is the narrator's refusal or inability to experience the expected maternal emotions. Throughout the memoir, the baby is repeatedly represented through animalistic and objectifying metaphors that emphasize estrangement. The narrator observes her daughter "as one would watch some exotic, uncaged animal, wondering what she is doing to do next" (Cusk, 2019, 70), a comparison that places the child outside the intimate emotional relationship conventionally associated with motherhood. These animalistic metaphors appear several times – "a creature" (Cusk, 2019, 25), "escaped zoo animal" (Cusk, 2019, 143) –, presenting her daughter as a non-human unfamiliarity and highlighting her daughter's unpredictability. In addition, the objectifying imagery, where the daughter is described as "an object" (Cusk, 2019, 117) or "a rucksack" (Cusk, 2019, 142), emphasizes the emotional distance and portrays the baby as a presence that can feel abstract. Similarly, she describes the baby's physical presence as "a surprising embodiment of my feelings of emptiness" (Cusk, 2019, 60), suggesting that the proximity to her daughter does not automatically produce the emotional attachment she had anticipated. As Fahlgren et al. argue, this choice of words does not adhere to the way a loving mother is expected to describe her child" (143). The recurrence of such imagery suggests that these are not isolated moments of detachment but a persistent feature of Cusk's maternal experience.

These representations are embedded in the text's recurring resistance to sentimentality, which directly challenges the myth of maternal happiness. Moments that might conventionally generate tenderness or joy are frequently narrated through observational, almost documentary descriptions: "Downstairs in the kitchen I prepare and eat breakfast with one arm while holding her with the other. [...] I read the newspaper. I clear up, again with one arm. [...] Presently I see that it is time for her to be fed" (Cusk, 2019, 70). The resulting unsentimental tone thus participates in the representation of the narrator's affective distance. Importantly, however, this distance does not amount to a complete rejection of her daughter or of maternal feeling. It exposes the gap between physical involvement in motherhood and the emotional world that the narrator had been led to expect from it. As she explicitly acknowledges, "I am unable to find any connection between my physical implication in the fact of her existence, and the emotional world I had imagined would automatically accompany it" (Cusk, 2019, 59). Maternal care and maternal feeling are

thus separated: the narrator remains physically and practically implicated in her daughter's existence without experiencing the spontaneous emotional attachment that cultural representations of the “natural mother” present as inevitable.

Moreover, the narrator’s use of economic vocabulary destabilizes the ideal of motherhood as inherently rewarding. Reflecting on what motherhood has cost her, she notes that “though much was given back to me in the form of my daughter it was not payment in kind nor even in a different coin, was not in fact recompense of any sort. My loss and gain were unrelated, were calculated without the aim of some final, ultimate balance” (Cusk, 2019, 151). The language of loss, gain, and failed compensation dismantles the expectation of an emotional situation in which maternal sacrifice is naturally offset by fulfillment. On the contrary, “loss and gain” remain “unrelated”, refusing any final balance. This aligns with the broader logic of the text, in which ambivalence is not something to be overcome but a persistent situation that disrupts both the myth of maternal happiness and the idea of healing narratives offered by therapeutic discourse.

Yet this apparent indifference does not signify an absence of attachment; it coexists with moments of love, producing a constant affective ambivalence. Cusk describes her relationship to the baby as a form of emotional deadlock: “I both want and fear it [her baby], and can consummate neither my desire nor my fear, for my feelings obstruct each other and hold me in a kind of deadlock” (Cusk, 2019, 58), and her love for her as conflicted: “like all loves this one has a conflicted core, a grain of torment that buffs the pearl of pleasure; unlike other loves, this conflict has no possibility of resolution” (Cusk, 2019, 142). The imagery of the “grain of torment” that “buffs” the “pearl of pleasure” suggests that suffering and pleasure are not simply opposed but intertwined. By denying the possibility of resolution, Cusk rejects the teleological expectation that ambivalence will give way to harmony, which is further reinforced through metaphors that render the child both precious and burdensome: the daughter is “everywhere, like something sweet but sticky on my life, like molasses, like glue” (Cusk, 2019, 149). Moments of unsentimentality or explicit ambivalence are also interrupted by moments of tenderness: “I look down at my daughter sleeping […], and a contrary wind of love gusts over me” (Cusk, 2019, 144). The image of the “contrary wind” suggests that love appears as a sudden and passing force rather than as a stable emotional condition. Such expressions contrast sharply with the indifference that is often emphasized, yet they remain fleeting, emerging within a broader affective numbness and sensation of estrangement.

Consequently, Cusk’s representation of maternal ambivalence positions the narrator as a maternal killjoy, as her affective ambivalence disrupts the expectation that motherhood should naturally produce happiness and emotional attachment. Yet *A Life’s Work* also complicates this figure: the narrator does not deliberately refuse the normative scripts of maternal instinct and fulfillment but stages an inability to experience it. Cusk thus expands the figure of the maternal killjoy: she does not simply reject the “happy object” of motherhood or consciously refuse its promise of happiness; she exposes the instability of the

happiness attached to it by inhabiting motherhood without being able to feel it in the expected way.

The second feature of this affective numbness is an altered temporality produced by suspension in moments after childbirth and then by repetition through the demands of care. This exhausting temporality of care also produces moments of mechanical crying and results in a disruption of narrative progression. In the moments after coming back home with her daughter, the narrator describes herself as "held in a kind of stasis of expectation and unstated commitment as I wait to discover the complexity of what I have." (Cusk, 2019, 60). This temporality of waiting is distinct from the anticipatory temporality of pregnancy or the forward movement implied in developmental narratives. It suggests instead a suspension in which affect is deferred. Similarly, the narrator admits "I don't quite understand what has happened and therefore I determine to conduct myself as though nothing had" (Cusk, 2019, 57), which illustrates a flattening of experience: rather than integrating the event of childbirth into a coherent narrative, she puts it aside and continues in a mode of performative normality that masks her underlying disorientation.

The suspension of the first moments quickly gives place to the altered temporality of care. Early motherhood is experienced less as a sequence of meaningful events than as a cyclical succession of recurring tasks. As Thomas observes, this produces a "merged sequence of 'nows'" (2019, 33), which blurs the distinction between different affective states. Cusk captures this experience particularly in her description of caring for her daughter, where the accumulation of small, unrelenting demands produces an exhausted and flattened affect:

> My daughter's pure and pearly being requires considerable maintenance. At first my relation to it is that of a kidney. I process its waste. Every three hours I pour milk into her mouth. It goes around a series of tubes and then comes out again. I dispose of it. Every twenty-four hours I immerse her in water and clean her. I change her clothes. When she has been inside for a period of time I take her outside. When she has been outside for a period of time I bring her in. When she goes to sleep I put her down. When she awakes I pick her up. […] Caring for her is like being responsible for the weather, or for the grass growing: my privileged relationship with time has changed, and though these tasks are not yet arduous they already constitute a sort of serfdom, a slavery, in that I am not free to go. (Cusk, 2019, 140-141)

In this passage, the shorter, grammatically simple sentences mirror the repetitive temporality they describe. They remove emotions from the actions and portray the moment of care in a robotic way, as a series of tasks ruled by external rhythms ("every three hours", "every twenty-four hours"). Affect is absent from this description: the narrator does not describe what she feels towards her daughter but lists what must be done. The comparison of herself to a "kidney" intensifies this reduction of motherhood to bodily function. Like an organ, she is defined by what she does, with the role to process, maintain, and dispose. The metaphor thus objectifies the maternal self and renders the child impersonal, reducing their relationship

to a system of biological operations. Likewise, the comparison between caring for the child and being "responsible for the weather, or for the grass growing" extends this idea in a different direction. These are processes that cannot be controlled but simply continue, much like the recurring demands of caring for an infant. The final shift into a longer sentence, in which the narrator reflects that her "privileged relationship with time has changed" makes explicit what the preceding syntax has already portrayed: repetitive care has altered her temporality of time by devoting it to the needs of another body. Similarly, the persistence of this temporal flattening emerges in the mother's perception of her daughter's development over time:

> Slowly the year rolled over: summer turned to autumn. My daughter learned to crawl and then to stand as the days drew in and it started to rain. Her development was not, as I had expected, taking the joyful form of a sprightly liberation from the paralysis of babyhood. Instead it was a slow and frustrating business. (Cusk, 2019, 170)

On the surface, this passage appears to restore a sense of chronological progression: the seasons change, and the daughter moves through developmental milestones. Yet this external movement does not correspond to an affective or narrative progression for Cusk. Rather, the passage participates in a recurring pattern in *A Life's Work* whereby the forward movement of time and the accumulation of developmental changes fail to produce the emotional transformation traditionally associated with them. Here, the anticipated joy associated with the child's development is explicitly negated and replaced by frustration, while the temporal movement of the seasons is narrated with an indifferent tone as Cusk's affect remains detached and even disappointed. The passage therefore separates chronological progression from affective progression: time moves forward, but the narrator does not necessarily move towards greater fulfillment, attachment, or understanding. On the contrary, the child's development demonstrates the persistence of affective flatness. While Johnson argues that milestones may exclude, generate shame, or feel oppressive (32), *A Life's Work* adds another dimension to this critique: milestones can also be disappointing when the developmental progress fails to produce the emotional transformation expected of them.

Within this exhausting and repetitive temporality of care, affective numbness also appears in the narrator's reflections on crying. Earlier moments of eruption culminate in tears, yet crying itself is gradually stripped of expressive meaning. Rather than functioning as catharsis, the gesture becomes at times repetitive, almost mechanical, no longer tied to a clear emotional cause but recurring as a habitual response: "I am invited to a party, and though I decide to go, and bathe and dress at the appointed hour, I end up sitting in the kitchen and crying" (Cusk, 2019, 63). This shift indicates a more extensive exhaustion of affect, where crying ceases to have a precise cause and marks the depletion of feeling. The body continues to register distress, but the narrative does not transform this into insight.

Finally, the memoir resists transforming repetitive care and affective exhaustion into a conventional narrative of emotional resolution. Unlike therapeutic writing, which seeks to transform negative affect into insight or healing, *A Life's Work* leaves numbness largely uninterpreted. Even moments that seem to be leading to recognition do not fully resolve the tension between expectation and experience, such as the realization that "although I have not helped or understood, I have been there all along and this, I suddenly and certainly know, is motherhood; this mere sufficiency, this presence" (Cusk, 2019, 76). This understanding functions as a "moment of vision", yet it is not sufficient to resolve the ambivalence in her feelings. This so-called "moment of vision" therefore becomes absorbed in the exhaustion that dominates the text. The persistence of numbness functions thus as a formal and affective refusal of closure.

The affective numbness in *A Life's Work* thus emerges not as an absence of feeling but as a state shaped by repetitive care, altered temporality, and unresolved ambivalence. Through the flattening of affect and the disruption of narrative progression, Cusk separates chronological and developmental movement from the expected progression towards maternal fulfillment. This section has also highlighted the extensive use of metaphorical language throughout the memoir, which tends to render maternal affect as unstable and contradictory. While Braun and Thomas identify metaphors of totalitarianism, Gothic horror, and colonization (§7-§9; 95), this analysis extends this account by identifying additional metaphorical registers, including the animal, the object, the weather, and economic exchange, as well as other material forms such as the grain, a pearl, and glue. Finally, the persistence of affective numbness, disrupted at times by affective agitation, does not simply culminate in exhaustion. It also leads to the emergence of inhibiting affects – mainly self-doubt and guilt – which the next section examines.

8.4. Affective Doubt and Guilt

In *A Life's Work*, self-doubt and guilt destabilize the frameworks through which motherhood is supposed to become understandable and emotionally coherent. In the course of the narrative, Cusk repeatedly encounters expert discourse, mainly the literature of pregnancy and medical professionals. This expert discourse promises to render maternal experience manageable. Yet rather than producing clarity or reassurance, these encounters generate confusion, even skepticism, and a sense of inadequacy, leading to a general impression of being a 'bad mother'. They intensify her uncertainty, producing a circular movement in which knowledge generates doubt and doubt leads to more research. In this way, Cusk challenges the myths of motherhood but also undermines, and at times mocks, self-help books. Therefore, she positions herself as a maternal killjoy who exposes the collective silence underpinning idealized narratives of motherhood. At the same time, she explicitly engages with self-help hermeneutics by offering her own version of that type of discourse.

This section first examines her engagement with – or rather her revision of – self-help literature and therapeutic writing. It then analyzes her encounters with parenting manuals and with that her resistance to self-help literature, before exploring how she turns to another type of literature to find some comfort. Finally, it investigates her interactions with medical professionals. Throughout this section, I will also analyze how the narrator's crisis of self-doubt and guilt is tied to a formal change that mirrors the narrator's fluctuating relation to authority and knowledge.

From the beginning, Cusk situates her experience in relation to a lack, or failure, of available knowledge. She describes arriving at motherhood "shocked and unprepared, ignorant of what the consequences of this arrival would be" (Cusk, 2019, 8), despite the abundance of cultural discourse surrounding it. This paradox of being surrounded by information yet remaining unprepared signals a distortion in maternal knowledge: what circulates are generalizations or even myths that obscure certain sides of lived experience. As she later reflects, she has "never personally encountered such a disciple of truth, [...] neither heard nor read [...] a straightforward account of this most ubiquitous of happenings" (Cusk, 2019, 24). From this sense of betrayal, the narrator thus positions her book in relation to the absence of truthful maternal narratives.

Consequently, *A Life's Work* situates itself within the field of self-help it later critiques. Cusk explicitly states that her book is for those who might relate to her experience, which is diverging from institutional representations: "the person who can moreover experience a book as an echo, a consolation, a mirror [...], is the person for whom I wrote this book" (Cusk, 2019, 3-4). She thereby positions her writing in the field of self-help hermeneutics, not in the way that it offers guidance or advice, but in its display of an alternative and marginalized experience which other people can connect with and seek comfort from. However, she explicitly distinguishes her memoir from a self-help book: "This is not a history or study of motherhood; nor […] is it a book about how to be a mother" (Cusk, 2019, 10); "This is not a childcare manual, ladies. [...] I am not telling you how to live" (Cusk, 2019, 4). Furthermore, she contests the idea that the text is motivated by resentment or confession, but grounds it instead in a broader reflection on writing itself:

> I didn't write it because I was vain either, or lazy, or proud, or malevolent. I didn't write it because I hated being a mother or hated my child or hated any child. I wrote it because I am a writer, and the experience of ambivalence that characterises the early stages of parenthood seemed to me to be kith and kin of the writer's fundamental ambivalence towards life; an ambivalence that is obscured by the organised social systems human communities devise, and that the writer or artist is always trying to recover and resolve. (Cusk, 2019, 4)

This passage positions writing as a practice of engaging with ambivalence rather than resolving it. While it refers to a desire to move towards recovery and resolution, echoing the discourse of therapeutic writing, it nevertheless foregrounds ambivalence as a central condition that remains inevitable for the artist. Writing does not function here as a tool for

self-improvement or emotional clarification in the conventional sense of therapeutic writing but becomes a space in which contradiction is expressed and sustained. Cusk accordingly reconfigures the role of writing: rather than offering guidance or resolution, it exposes the instability of maternal experience and resists its assimilation into coherent narratives of growth or fulfillment.

The gap between the abundance of available knowledge and the narrator's sense of being "shocked and unprepared" becomes particularly apparent in her confrontation with parenting manuals, a strand of self-help literature. While such discourse typically frames motherhood as a process that becomes more easily manageable through knowledge, Cusk's depiction resists this expectation. For instance, the narrator's detailed tracking of feeding times, sleep patterns – her "professorial" knowledge of "calorific intake" and "patterns of crying" (Cusk, 2019, 63) – does not lead to greater understanding of care. Instead, knowledge further highlights the gap between frameworks offered by expert discourse and lived experience.

Furthermore, Cusk resists this self-help literature by explicitly criticizing their prescriptive discourse. These present themselves as neutral sources of guidance, yet the narrator reveals that they impose normative expectations regarding maternal behavior and thereby reinforce ideals of motherhood. She exposes their moralizing and authoritative tone and reveals how they produce rather than alleviate maternal anxiety. Like Dr. Feber, who "clearly believes that children's sleep problems are caused by their parents" (Cusk, 2019, 192), the so-called advice seems to put all responsibilities on parents, and often more specifically on mothers.

The narrator's affective response to these texts is not reassurance but a sense of being judged and controlled: "I feel hated, chastised. [...] This book supports all mothers, it says insincerely, not just those who breastfeed their babies. If you really feel you must bottle-feed then at least make sure that your baby doesn't miss out *too* much" (Cusk, 2019, 120). The ironic distance in "its says insincerely" exposes the contradiction between the inclusive discourse of self-help literature and its underlying normative assumptions. Rather than accepting different feeding practices, these texts reinforce a singular ideal of motherhood against which the narrator measures herself and inevitably finds herself doubting and failing. In this sense, self-help books thus contribute to the production of guilt and self-doubt.

Moreover, Cusk's inability to recognize herself in these manuals intensifies her sense of isolation. When she observes that "everything it said in these books, Miranda seemed to feel. Her life was in agreement with them where mine was not" (Cusk, 2019, 204), the gap between lived experience and prescriptive discourse becomes socially embodied. The alignment between Miranda and the books suggests that these texts shape certain experiences as normative, rendering others deviant. She therefore turns to another type of literature, such as *Madame Bovary*, *Jane Eyre*, and Coleridge's poem "Frost at Midnight" where she finds comfort and which she can connect to her personal experiences. In

Coleridge's poem, for instance, she appreciates the feelings that are expressed without the overwhelming mention of everyday motherhood-related objects and stimulus:

> He imagines his baby grown up, wandering the world, seeing marvels. Confinement becomes freedom, ugliness beauty: parenthood is redemptive, transformative, creative. [...] Coleridge does not mention nappies, noise, bits of food. [...] His poem is written in the present tense: it describes a moment, surrounded, by implication, by other moments, by noise and disarray. Perhaps moments, now, are all there is. But this is a moment to which he brings his gift, which is language, a moment in which his love finds a voice. (Cusk, 2019, 147-148)

Her interpretation of the poem also reflects her ambiguous feelings towards her daughter: all the love she feels for her, however surrounded by negative emotions. The temporality in his poem shifts away from the linear logic characteristic of both medical discourse and self-help narratives and instead operates in a present tense that isolates and intensifies individual moments, allowing ambivalent affects to coexist without resolution. Cusk's emphasis on "moments" resonates with her own narrative form, which privileges episodic and reflective fragments over teleological development. Writing in Coleridge's poem creates a space in which contradictions can be articulated, mirroring Cusk's own desire in her writing. This type of consolation also brings a new perspective on self-help hermeneutics: although common guidance such as expert discourse in self-help books is usually regarded as what can bring clarity and transformation, mothers can also turn to other, perhaps less expected, sources of reassurance.

While doubt is frequently staged through long, recursive sentences that accumulate clauses, the narrator's encounters with medical professionals are on the contrary articulated through shorter exchanges that expose her disorientation. In contrast to the syntactic density of reflective passages, interactions with medical professionals are thus rendered in short, declarative sentences that emphasize distance and incomprehension:

> I tell my doctor that I am pregnant and he does a sum on a bit of paper involving dates. It is now July. He gives me a date in March of the following year. It takes me some time to realise that this is the day on which he expects my child to be born. He tells me to see the midwife. Close the door on your way out, he says. (Cusk, 2019, 22)

The shorter sentences following one another without elaboration mirror the doctor's procedural logic, in which pregnancy is reduced to calculation. Temporal experience is reorganized into a linear projection, imposing a chrononormative framework that contrasts with the narrator's felt temporality. Her delayed understanding with "it takes me some time to realise" signals confusion and a misalignment between medical knowledge and embodied experience. The doctor's final instruction, "close the door on your way out", abruptly ends the interaction and reinforces her exclusion from a discourse that concerns her own body. Furthermore, it stops her from asking more questions, leaving her with her perplexity. In this

passage, form registers affective doubt as disconnection: she hears the doctor's instructions, but the information does not turn into comprehension or reassurance.

This dynamic is also visible in moments where the narrator explicitly seeks guidance, only to find that the advice she receives is vague and circular, remaining ultimately unhelpful. In one interaction with a midwife, the promise of intuitive maternal knowledge coming from the myth of the 'natural mother' collapses into a sense of escalating uncertainty:

> How often should I feed her, I ask another midwife when she comes to the house. Whenever she's hungry, replies the midwife. How do I know when she' hungry? You'll soon be able to tell, she replies with a glint that I think it meant to be conspiratorial. But in the meantime, I persist, how do I know? The midwife looks worried. It is clear that I have a problem. (Cusk, 2019, 105)

This dialogue is structured through repetition and failed clarification, as each answer defers the question rather than resolving it. The midwife's appeal to future knowledge, "you'll soon be able to tell", invokes the myth of instinctive motherhood, in which understanding is supposed to emerge naturally over time. However, for Cusk, this future and vague temporality of competence does not offer reassurance. Her insistence with "how do I know?" disrupts the assumed self-evidence of maternal intuition, exposing it as a cultural fantasy rather than an experienced reality. The midwife's growing unease, culminating in Cusk's impression that she has a problem as a mother, creates a burden of failure on the narrator herself. Doubt thus becomes pathologized, which strengthens her sense of inadequacy.

While expert discourse fails to provide clarity and reassurance, it also exerts a powerful normative pressure that the narrator internalizes as guilt. She constantly feels observed, even by herself, as if she had another "self" judging her: "Now it is as if some spy is embedded within me, before whose scrutiny I am guilty and self-conscious" (Cusk, 2019, 40–41). The metaphor of the spy suggests an internalization of external judgment, as though the evaluative gaze of medical authority and public opinion has been absorbed into her own subjectivity. Guilt here is anticipatory: she is not guilty of a specific action yet but of an ongoing sense of inadequacy and fear of a failure to meet cultural standards. This aligns in a way with the logic of self-help and therapeutic writing discourses, which encourage self-monitoring and self-correction, yet in Cusk's account this process does not produce self-development but heightened self-doubt. The departure from dominant scripts also leads the narrator to question her own character to the point of self-condemnation: "I begin to see my predicament as the result of some deep failure of sensibility, some meanness of soul" (Cusk, 2019, 146).

Similarly, she later reflects: "This can't, I am sure, be normal. I suspect some failure in myself: of force, of identity, of purpose" (Cusk, 2019, 181). The accumulation of force, identity, and purpose in her sense of failure suggests that her perceived inadequacy extends across multiple dimensions of selfhood, demonstrating how cultural scripts of motherhood impact not only the vision of a woman as a mother but the perception of self in general.

Rather than locating the difficulty of motherhood in external conditions, the narrator interprets her experience as evidence of a lack within herself. This illustrates how myths of motherhood operate not only as external norms but as internalized frameworks through which maternal subjects evaluate themselves.

Within these destabilizing encounters with professionals, the memoir features one strikingly different interaction with a woman doing research on the experiences of new mothers: “Oh dear, says the woman. I wait for her to tell me that the baby is hungry but she does not. She asks me if I am exhausted. I say that I am. I recount, uncertainly, the rambling dream of feeding and crying that my life has become. She listens sympathetically” (Cusk, 2019, 110). Unlike the previous encounters, in which professional knowledge is directed primarily towards the baby and reinforces the narrator’s sense of inadequacy, this woman turns her attention towards the narrator herself, asking whether she is “exhausted”. This contrast momentarily disrupts the myth of the ‘self-sacrificing mother’, in which the mother is expected to function primarily as the caregiver rather than as someone in need of care herself. Yet the narrator’s response also reveals how deeply this evaluative framework has been internalized: she initially waits for the woman to tell her that “the baby is hungry,” anticipating once again that her own experience will be interpreted through the needs of the child. The encounter therefore offers a rare moment of recognition while exposing how difficult it has become for the narrator – “I recount, uncertainly” – to perceive herself as a subject whose own exhaustion and distress are worthy of attention.

While Cusk stages self-doubt and guilt throughout the memoir, the last chapter, “Heartburn”, complicates this dynamic. As her daughter develops a more distinct personality and “grows more separate from [her]” (Cusk, 2019, 214), the narrator experiences both a renewed sense of freedom and a sense of loss: “I miss my daughter’s babyhood already” (Cusk, 2019, 212). Ambivalence therefore persists even as the immediate demands of early motherhood begin to recede. Yet the memoir’s final scene introduces a significant shift in the narrator’s position. Observing a new mother struggling to soothe her crying baby, she recognizes the woman’s exhaustion and disorientation:

> The baby’s cries are fast with barely a beat between them. [...] I can see by the way she moves her body that she is still stunned with childbirth. Go home, I think. Wrap the baby in a tea-towel, she won’t care. She doesn’t give in. [...]. The baby cries and cries; and it is all I can do not to lift it from its pram and hold its small, frightened body close against my chest, hold it and hold it until it stops, so certain am I that it would, that it would know that I knew, and be consoled. (Cusk, 2019, 217-218)

This final passage contrasts strongly with the narrator’s journey into early motherhood. Throughout *A Life’s Work*, she has constantly experienced herself as the mother who does not know: she questions her own actions, seeks guidance from professionals and self-help literature, and struggles to understand what is expected of her. In observing this new mother, however, she occupies a new position. She recognizes the signs of exhaustion and

disorientation she has experienced herself, and imagines that she could console the baby because she now knows how to respond to its distress. The narrator thus becomes, in this final scene, the mother who knows. Yet this knowledge does not take the form of prescribed rules for motherhood; it is experiential, grounded in having lived through the uncertainty she now recognizes in another mother. Therefore, the ending introduces a certain form of transformation which, while aligning in some respects with the logic of self-help hermeneutics, does not transform the memoir into a narrative of self-improvement and resolution. Indeed, it is only after time has passed and the years of early motherhood, with their greatest challenges, are behind her that the narrator gains sufficient distance from her own experience to imagine how she might console the baby.

This section has revealed that affective doubt and guilt in *A Life's Work* emerge from the gap between the knowledge promised by dominant maternal discourses and the uncertainty of lived experience. Parenting manuals and medical professionals present motherhood as something that can be made intelligible through expert knowledge, yet their prescriptive forms of guidance instead intensify the narrator's self-monitoring and sense of inadequacy. Cusk consequently exposes the internalization of maternal norms while also positioning her own writing as an alternative form of knowledge. Her turn to literature and poetry further suggests that reassurance does not necessarily come from experts' guidance but can emerge from forms that allow experience to remain complex and unresolved. The final scene nevertheless complicates her resistance to transformation: with the distance provided by time, the narrator acquires experiential knowledge.

The analysis of *A Life's Work* has revealed that Cusk's text constantly resists the affective conventions through which motherhood is traditionally perceived. Across the memoir's three affective states – eruption, numbness, and doubt –, experience remains misaligned with the cultural frameworks that seek to dictate it. Narrative form reproduces the instability of affect, whether through sudden ruptures, typographical emphases, extended reflections, or recursive movements of repetition. What emerges from these three categories is not a progression from disorientation to resolution and management, but the persistence of ambivalence as a perpetual aspect of maternal experience. Moments of agitation give way to numbness without producing catharsis; detachment coexists with attachment; self-doubt and guilt generate knowledge only to undermine it again, leading to exhaustion as well. This constant oscillation prevents the stabilization of any single affective state and disrupts the expectation that motherhood culminates in emotional clarity or fulfillment. Ambivalence is thus not a transitional phase to be overcome but a sustained affect that is central to expose the inadequacy of dominant maternal scripts.

Chapter 9 – Conclusion: A Comparison of Cusk's and Heti's Maternal Narratives

This chapter brings together the analyses of Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* in order to examine what emerges when the two texts are read comparatively. Although they are marked by a central difference in experience – *Motherhood* follows the prolonged uncertainty of whether to have a child, whereas *A Life's Work* recounts the disorienting experience of early motherhood –, this difference does not lead to fundamentally opposed narrative logics. Indeed, their comparison reveals a shared resistance to the narrative and affective demand for resolution.

While each text has been shown to challenge dominant myths of motherhood through their combinations of affect and form, the first section brings their different techniques into comparison in order to identify more precisely their shared and divergent affective-formal strategies. In doing so, it develops Fahlgren et al.'s comparative analysis of the two texts, and closes the gap in Thomas' analysis where their temporalities were analyzed separately. Furthermore, as established in earlier chapters, dominant myths of motherhood are sustained through narrative models that privilege self-betterment and emotional clarity, aligning with the logic of self-help hermeneutics and therapeutic writing. While the preceding analyses have examined how they engage with and resist these frameworks, this comparative reading makes their different yet related strategies more visible and reveals how both texts can be understood as forms of negative self-help writing that expose the "affective injustice" (Latham et al., 12) produced by the oppressive emotional regime of motherhood.

The second section then considers the broader implications of that resistance. The comparative analysis brings the two texts into dialogue with broader contemporary discourses connected to understandings of motherhood, including Ruddick's concept of "maternal thinking", Ahmed's figure of the "killjoy", and Ngai's account of "ugly feelings". The chapter also brings their responses to the contemporary socio-economic, political, and environmental context, thereby entering into dialogue with critics such as Houser and considering how attention to affect and form can extend or complicate existing accounts of contemporary motherhood. Therefore, this chapter argues that reading these two texts together clarifies their shared and divergent challenges to dominant myths of motherhood but also demonstrates how they expose and respond to structures through which contemporary motherhood is experienced.

9.1. Resisting Resolution: Affect, Form, and Self-Help Culture

Regarding their macro-structure, *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* appear at first glance to adopt contrasting formal strategies. Heti's text shifts to a cyclical structure based on the menstrual cycle, with particular phases associated with recurring emotional intensities, and materializes disruption explicitly on the page through an overtly fragmented layout. By

contrast, *A Life's Work* is structured thematically rather than chronologically, and appears generally unified. Yet this contrast in appearance ultimately conceals a central convergence: both texts resist a linear organization and expectations of narrative development. Their chapters unfold without forming a clear developmental trajectory but instead return to the same central concerns. In *Motherhood*, the narrative circles the question of whether or not to have a child, while *A Life's Work* moves from theme to theme without resolving the narrator's sense of failing to inhabit an ideal maternal identity. Their macrostructures thus both formally enact a disengagement from chrononormative progression, reflecting a lived temporality that is recursive and producing forms in which affect circulates without resolution. The two texts also reveal that both cyclicality and discontinuity challenge coherence and therapeutic orientation, even if it is visually more evident in *Motherhood*.

This observation of disconnection with chrononormative progression resonates with Thomas' argument that maternal narratives operate within an "altered temporality" (2019, 27). However, while Thomas reads *Motherhood* as a return narrative oriented toward genealogical repair and eventual resolution (2019, 55), this analysis suggests an additional and different temporal logic. Regarding reproductive choice, Heti's cyclical structure does not move toward reparation but sustains a recursive mode of wondering. This form of repetition can be read as analogous to the cyclical temporality of maternal care identified by Thomas, but it displaces that temporality into a psychological level rather than into the level of action. Thereby, *Motherhood* extends the scope of maternal temporality beyond the rhythms of care to include the repetitive and unresolved mental processes through which maternal identity is questioned and deferred. Similarly, in *A Life's Work*, cyclical returns are not only grounded in the physical routines of care but also in the narrator's persistent re-evaluation of maternal norms, producing a temporality that is both experiential and reflective. Read together, these books therefore suggest the existence of a similar recursive temporality, whether it is associated with the repetitive rhythms of maternal care or the experience of wondering.

These different temporal and formal strategies produce a comparable affective impasse. Heti's fragmented, cyclical form produces a sense of interruption and repetition that mirrors the narrator's recursive thinking, preventing the consolidation of a stable decision. Cusk's dense, continuous prose, on the other hand, generates a feeling of saturation, reflecting the overwhelming nature of early motherhood. In both cases, affects persist without being transformed into stages of a developmental trajectory, resisting the expectation that difficulty should lead to transformation and resolution. Their divergent forms thus converge in exposing the tenacity of ambivalence and the difficulty of narrating maternal experience within existing frameworks.

This shared impasse is not only visible in the macro-structure but takes shape through three more specific affective states which this chapter will now compare in the two texts: flat emotions, occasionally interrupted by stronger affects, and overlapping with inhibiting affects. Among these, flattened affect appears as a particularly persistent state, although it is

articulated differently in each work. In *A Life's Work*, numbness is frequently associated with the physical and psychological exhaustion of early motherhood – "In the early months of my daughter's life I felt my own tiredness as a physical shock" (Cusk, 2008, 183) – and oscillates between moments of affective overload and affective detachment. In *Motherhood*, by contrast, it is more closely tied to the narrator's prolonged reproductive uncertainty.

Formally, the two narrators adopt opposite strategy: Cusk generally expresses affective numbness through short sentences mirroring the temporality of care, while Heti's narrator mostly articulates emotional flatness affect through a general temporality of circularity. This distinction reflects their different situations: Cusk's numbness is strongly embodied in the demands of maternal care, whereas the narrator's emotional flatness in *Motherhood* is primarily experienced as a mental condition produced by prolonged wondering. Yet neither text allows flattened affect to be consistently tied to one stylistic pattern, which reinforces the broader refusal to translate experience into a stable and intelligible form. Besides, these representations complicate the relation to therapeutic discourses. While such frameworks typically assume that writing and thus articulating affect will lead to an acceptance of feelings and transformation (Gladding et al., 1), both texts depict a condition in which affect exceeds or withdraws from expression. Yet, they continue to narrate their experiences and this impasse, suggesting a more ambivalent engagement in which writing does not heal affect but still devotes attention to it and persists in trying to portray it.

A similar convergence emerges in the representation of agitation, although here the contrast between the texts is particularly pronounced. In *A Life' Work*, exhaustion erupts into anger, panic, or irritation, with affect directed both towards the child and towards the social structures surrounding motherhood. Cusk's affective agitation is also directed both towards herself, emerging from a feeling of inadequacy, and outwards, resulting from the sustained effort to maintain "the mask of motherhood" (Kinser, 123) while enduring a loss of autonomy and the constant surveillance of the maternal body. In *Motherhood*, agitation is predominantly internalized, taking the form of anxiety, self-directed frustration, and recursive questioning as the narrator repeatedly attempts to determine whether she wants to become a mother. The difference thus corresponds to their divergent positions: Cusk confronts the demands of performing motherhood, while Heti confronts the pressures of deciding whether to enter it. Their affective intensities also differ, with Cusk allowing greater space for explosive anger and Heti more often sustaining lower-intensity forms of agitation. This distinction will be part of the discussion on the concept of Ngai's "ugly feelings" in the second section.

A third major affective state shared by both texts is that of inhibiting affects, including envy, guilt, self-doubt, and shame. While the preceding comparison of affective numbness and affective agitation has highlighted important similarities and differences between the two texts, inhibiting affects offer a particularly productive basis for comparison, as they reveal broader connections between affects, self-help and therapeutic discourses, and the pressures

of maternal norms. I therefore explore this affective state in several steps. I first examine envy and its relational dimension before turning to form and the other inhibiting affects in the narrators' interactions with medical professionals. The section then analyzes how the narrators attempt to resolve self-doubt through guidance from different forms of self-help, before considering their resistance to self-help discourse, notably through the concept of "affective injustice", and their reconfiguration as alternative self-help books. Finally, I turn to the question of writing and the role therapeutic writing discourse.

Envy provides a first point of comparison because, unlike the other inhibiting affects, it is not primarily connected to attempts to resolve uncertainty through external guidance. Instead, it reveals the relational dimension of the two texts' affective impasse. Rather than belonging exclusively to either mothers or non-mothers, it emerges as a relational affect produced both by those who have children and those who have not. In *A Life's Work*, envy is directed outward: the narrator positions herself in relation to those who remain "light and free and unencumbered", whom she begins to perceive "as if they were members of a different species" (Cusk, 2019, 142), envying the freedom she has now lost. It is also interesting to note that the loss of freedom Cusk experiences is one of the things Heti's narrator is so afraid of if choosing motherhood. Cusk's perception of non-mothers as free and different signals a sense of exclusion, but also a reconfiguration of social belonging. Indeed, she states that "My friends, whilst glad to see me, cannot necessarily afford me. We meet at the uncrossable border between the free world and closed regime of motherhood" (Cusk, 2019, 93). Envy is thus connected to isolation, marking the narrator's awareness of what has been lost. This affect is not limited to non-mothers but extends to other mothers, particularly those who appear to embody a more positive experience of motherhood, such as the example of Miranda in Chapter Eight. In *A Life's Work*, envy hence destabilizes the belief in a shared maternal condition, revealing instead a field of comparison and inadequacy.

In *Motherhood*, by contrast, envy is not really experienced by the narrator herself but projected onto her by her pregnant friend Libby: "She expressed anxiety about me moving forward in my work. With her pregnancy-brain, she felt sure she would fall behind everyone she knew [...]. She told me not to do so much. *Stop making things!* she said." (Heti, 2018, 174). This passage reverses the distribution of envy observed in Cusk, with the narrator in the position of the non-mother, while expressing the same logic: it is the mother who envies the perceived freedom and productivity of the non-mother. However, this passage functions as a unique point in the book: rather than being envied, the narrator, as a non-mother, is often positioned as lacking, subjected to pity or misunderstanding: "Some people try to imagine what it's like not to have children […]. They project their own sadness over not having this experience on those who don't want it at all" (Heti, 2018, 161).

Consequently, these moments reveal two sides of the same relational structure. Where Cusk, from within motherhood, experiences a sense of exclusion from a world of freedom, Heti's narrator, from outside motherhood, experiences the discomfort of being

closely confronted with it, as when she resists the suggestion to observe families with children: "*I don't even want to spend one second doing that*" (Heti, 2018, 132). Cusk's sense of estrangement from childless people mirrors Heti's around mothers, suggesting that both texts stage reciprocal forms of distance and misalignment. Yet envy complicates a simple opposition between motherhood and non-motherhood: it exposes the instability of both positions, as each is associated with forms of desire and loss. Rather than resolving this tension, envy keeps the two positions in a relation of comparison, preventing either from emerging as a settled or uncomplicated position and thus contributing to the sense of suspension that characterizes both narratives.

The inhibiting affects of guilt, shame, and self-doubt are closely connected to the narrators' attempts to find guidance. In both texts, interactions with medical professionals provide a different type of knowledge, one related to reproductive decision-making and the other to motherhood. Furthermore, these interactions reveal a different relation to medical authority. While the narrator's experience in *Motherhood* is not punctuated by encounters with medical professionals to the same extent as Cusk's, she does have two medical appointments regarding her fertility: one in which she is told that her ovaries are still young – "*Congratulations - it's good news!* (127) – and another concerning her method of contraception (28). These encounters can be compared with Cusk's multiple interactions with medical professionals, including the doctor who announces the date of childbirth (22) and the nurse who does not clearly answer her question about the frequency of breastfeeding (105). These excerpts have been analyzed in terms of affect in Chapters Seven and Eight, respectively, but reading them together further reveals that narrative form shapes the two narrators' relationship to medical authority. Both *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* expose a tension between external authority and internal experience, from which affects such as shame, guilt, and self-doubt emerge. However, in Cusk's case, the interactions with professionals are often more confusing: their statements and answers are not always distinguished typographically – in italics – like in Heti, making it harder to determine who is speaking and mirroring Cusk's interior sense of disorientation. These interactions thus bring to light a more pronounced experience of inhibiting affects in relation to medical discourse in maternal experience, where the pressure to act adequately becomes overwhelming.

The narrators' attempts to find guidance are mostly connected to traditional or alternative forms of self-help. In both texts, the narrators turn to sources beyond their immediate experience in an attempt to answer their questions and navigate their experiences. However, the nature of these sources differs significantly: in *Motherhood*, the narrator relies on more abstract and divinatory forms of interpretation, including the *I Ching*, and a tarot reading session, whereas in *A Life's Work*, Cusk engages with parenting literature. The two texts expose different forms of uncertainty produced by the search for knowledge: Heti's narrator repeatedly generates further interpretations, whereas Cusk becomes overwhelmed by competing instructions and the tension between external authority and internal experience. Yet in both cases, guidance fails to provide the clarity it promises.

In *Motherhood*, the narrator relies on divinatory practices that echo the promise of meaningful insight in self-help logic. Indeed, the *I Ching* offers binary answers (*yes*/*no*) that supposedly offer clarity, the fortune cookies mimic the self-help discourse of positive thinking, and the tarot reading is meant to guide decision-making. The narrator acknowledges their usefulness in creating new reflections: "But it's useful, this, as a way of interrupting my habits of thoughts […] When I get an answer I don't expect, I have to push myself to find another answer" (Heti, 2018, 76). Yet, Heti's protagonist explicitly foregrounds the arbitrariness of these systems: "I'm projecting onto you, coins, the wisdom of the universe" (Heti, 2018, 76). This ambivalence is thus central to *Motherhood's* engagement with self-help hermeneutics, as the text adopts a structure of guidance while undermining its teleological logic.

In addition, these systems render interpretation unstable and proliferate uncertainty. This is particularly evident in her dialogue with the *I Ching*, where moments of apparent resolution are immediately destabilized. When the coins affirm that "a woman who makes books" may be "let off the hook" for not having children (Heti, 2018, 24), the narrator begins to articulate an alternative framework of fulfillment, one centered on individuality rather than gendered expectation. But this line of thought is abruptly negated by the *I Ching*'s answer: "Is that right? - *no*" (Heti, 2018, 25). Rather than guiding the narrator toward a decision, the text thus insists on ambivalence. Consequently, *Motherhood* resists self-help not through outright rejection, but by adopting structures of guidance that only deepen vague interpretation and unclarity. The central question of whether to have a child remains suspended until it is rendered definitive by the passage of time. This temporal deferral undermines the self-help imperative to act and transform, replacing it with a model of passive irresolution. The logic of self-help is further challenged with the narrator's intake of medication, which replaces the change promised by such discourse.

Cusk's *A Life's Work* offers a more direct confrontation with self-help discourse, particularly in its engagement with pregnancy manuals and parenting literature. These texts, which supposedly function as guides to maternal competence, are represented as coercive, anxiety-producing, and alienating: "Like a bad parent, the literature of pregnancy bristles with threats and the promise of reprisal, with ghoulish hints at the consequences of thoughtless actions" (Cusk, 2019, 35). Cusk finds these books "righteous and faintly bullying", their apparent friendliness unable to conceal a "dictatorial lust" for control (Cusk, 2019, 118-119). This highly positive, silly didactic is mocked by Cusk through irony, such as when she states from a manual: "In the seventeenth week the baby develops hearing. It can hear your voice, the voice of its mother!" (Cusk, 2019, 36). The exclamation mark signals a forced positivity that masks an underlying prescriptiveness. Rather than translating information into confidence, these texts transform knowledge into another standard against which the narrator measures herself.

Furthermore, the resulting gap between maternal ideals and lived experience produces what Choi et al. describe the "myth-reality discrepancy" (168): Cusk increasingly

interprets her inability to feel or behave accordingly to these ideals as evidence of personal failure. In this respect, Cusk's narrative resonates with Houser's account of "contortions of thought" produced when women negotiate dominant expectations surrounding reproductive choice (622; 633). Yet Cusk's account also extends Houser's argument beyond the context of wondering and suggests that such affective contortions do not necessarily end once motherhood has been chosen or entered, but can persist within maternal experience itself whenever lived experience fails to correspond to the idealized maternal script.

Both narrators thus seek guidance outside of themselves that might facilitate their situation, but the nature of this search differs according to their respective position. Whereas Heti's narrator seeks an answer to the question *whether* she should become a mother, Cusk seeks knowledge about *how* to be one. Whereas Heti's sources of guidance proliferate possibilities, Cusk's sources multiply obligations. And finally, whereas Heti's protagonist sustains uncertainty through interpretation, Cusk intensifies self-surveillance through prescription. Yet neither produces the self-betterment promised by conventional self-help. In both texts, their attempt to make experience coherent instead becomes another source of affective difficulty. This difficulty can be further understood through Latham et al.'s concept of "affective injustice", which they use to describe the emotional harms that can arise when self-help discourse is applied in contexts of systemic oppression (12). Because self-help places "the responsibility of well-being on the individual's power to overcome difficulties", its norms can discourage the expression of experiences that do not conform to its emphasis on positivity and self-management (Latham et al., 11). Latham et al. further argue that self-help can reinforce oppression by imposing the emotional norms of dominant groups, thereby dismissing the emotions of those experiencing structural difficulties (12). Self-help participates thus in an "emotional regime": a "set of social norms" that determines which emotions are considered appropriate and how they should be experienced and expressed (Latham et al., 5).

This dynamic is for instance visible when a friend tells Cusk, "You mustn't forget all the good things" (Cusk, 2019, 207). Cusk's immediate incomprehension, "for a minute I really didn't know what she was talking about", followed by the recognition that "It was as if I was reading one of those books again" (Cusk, 2019, 207-208) explicitly links this advice to the prescriptive discourse of self-help literature. The friend's statement does not echo Cusk's actual experience; instead, it directs her attention towards the "good things" she is expected to perceive. Her unspoken response, " I almost said, they aren't any good things" (Cusk, 2019, 208), exposes the gap between this prescribed positivity and her lived affective experience. The exchange thus exemplifies a form of affective injustice: rather tan having her difficult emotions acknowledged, Cusk is encouraged to replace them with positive emotions so that they conform to the emotional regime of motherhood. The texts' exposure of this affective injustice is therefore central to their critique of self-help discourse.

The two texts nevertheless do not simply reject the self-help framework. Both participate in the self-help culture as they enable processes of self-understanding, identification, and navigation of ambivalent experiences. In this sense, they can function as alternative forms of literary self-help, particularly for women confronting experiences of reproductive uncertainty and motherhood that are often marginalized or perceived as abnormal. Rather than presenting reflections as a means towards self-knowledge and self-betterment, they allow difficult emotions and contradictions to persist. Their value therefore lies not in providing answers or solutions, but in making unresolved experiences intelligible and recognizable. In this respect, *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* can be understood as forms of negative or ironic self-help books: they bring insights to women in need of a similar experience, thereby appropriating the reflective function of self-help, while withholding its promise of improvement and resolution. Their exposure of affective injustice further distinguishes this form of negative self-help from conventional self-help discourse: rather than encouraging readers to regulate difficult emotions in accordance with dominant emotional norms, these texts make visible the social expectations that render such emotions problematic in the first place. They disclose emotions deemed negative, allowing them to persist without culminating in a transformation coming from the self.

The question of guidance ultimately leads to a broader question of writing itself, which occupies a significant but different position in the two texts. Rather than functioning only as a means of articulating maternal experience, writing becomes a central site where the tension between motherhood and self-realization is discussed. In *Motherhood*, this relationship remains largely hypothetical: writing is imagined both as a competing life project and as a possible substitute for motherhood. This tension is articulated through recurring analogies between writing and motherhood, as when the narrator reflects that there are "so many kinds of life to give birth to in this world, apart from a literal human life" (Heti, 2018, 168). Furthermore, the narrator often expresses the fear that, if she became a mother, it would be incompatible with maintaining her writing career. This anxiety even appears at a more subconscious level, materializing in a dream where she refuses Miles' desire for a child because she feels that "if I said yes, I would abandon my child" (Heti, 2018, 122), with the child potentially functioning as a metaphor for her writing. Yet this substitution remains unstable: although writing offers an alternative form of creation, the narrator continues to question whether it can compensate for not experiencing motherhood. Her later wondering, "could I ever hope to be a good enough writer – capture on the page what being human felt like – if I had not experienced motherhood?" (Heti, 2018, 187), therefore reveals that writing does not resolve the reproductive question but becomes another subject of uncertainty.

In *A Life's Work*, by contrast, this tension between writing and motherhood is no longer hypothetical but lived. Cusk does not imagine writing as a substitute for motherhood but confronts the practical and temporal incompatibility between the two. The temporal demands that Heti's narrator fears – the loss of time, autonomy, and energy for writing – become a concrete reality of early motherhood. Yet Cusk's text respond to the relationship

established in *Motherhood*: rather than asking whether motherhood might deprive writing of its necessary experience, it presents ambivalence itself – and in her case maternal ambivalence – as material for writing that "the writer […] is always trying to recover and resolve" (Cusk, 2019, 4). Cusk thus suggests that one does not need to go through maternal experience itself to be a good writer; experiencing the ambivalence towards it is enough. Read together, these two texts thus offer complementary configurations of writing and motherhood. In both cases, however, writing occupies a paradoxical position: it is simultaneously entangled with the conflicts surrounding motherhood and provides a means of registering those conflicts. This raises the question of whether such articulation can itself be understood as therapeutic.

Similarly to their relation to self-help discourse, both texts engage with the expectations of therapeutic writing while resisting them. Both texts foreground experiences that are difficult to reconcile with dominant maternal narratives and consequently articulate affects that are often experienced and perceived as illegitimate or abnormal. However, they challenge the expectation that writing will produce catharsis, clarity, or emotional resolution. Rather than healing difficult affects, writing documents them, allowing their persistence to be registered. The texts thus engage in a limited form of therapeutic work while simultaneously exposing the limits of therapeutic teleology. Furthermore, as seen in their respective chapters, both narrators do experience a certain degree of appeasement by the end of the books. Yet this change results mainly from the passage of time – the childbearing years for Heti's protagonist and the most significant struggles of early motherhood for Cusk – rather than from external guidance or writing itself. Nevertheless, the effects of articulating difficult emotional states and contradictory affects cannot be completely dismissed. Writing may not heal or resolve these experiences, but it can make them more intelligible and provide a space in which they can be acknowledged without being overcome.

9.2. Rewriting Contemporary Motherhood: From Affective Resistance to Cultural Critique

Beyond their engagement with self-help and therapeutic discourses, *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* enter into dialogue with broader contemporary discourses connected to understandings of motherhood and reproductive choice. Building on the preceding analyses, this section examines how *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* participate in and reshape several of these discourses. The section first briefly examines the early socialization of motherhood and the question of women's social value outside of motherhood. It then returns to discussions on matrophobia and key concepts from motherhood studies, such as Ruddick's "maternal thinking", before engaging with Ahmed's figure of the "killjoy" and the reconsideration of negative emotions. I then consider the books' reconfiguration of Ngai's "ugly feelings" and connect irritation with Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism". Finally, I look at how Heti's and Cusk's maternal narratives respond to the contemporary transformations outlined in Chapter One.

Motherhood and *A Life's Work* both expose the extent to which reproductive questions and maternal behaviors are socially prescribed and affectively charged long before they are consciously articulated. In both texts, the question of motherhood appears not as a neutral or purely personal decision, but as what each narrator identifies as a "mystery" of female experience. Cusk recalls that "more than love, more than work, more than length of life or quantity of happiness", the question of whether she would have children was "the mystery [she] found most compelling" (Cusk, 2019, 7). Similarly, Heti describes the desire for children as "the greatest secret I keep from myself" (Heti, 2018, 21). These statements point back to early socialization processes through which girls are taught from a young age that they are destined to have children (Bisht, 120), suggesting that the reproductive question is deeply shaped by cultural scripts even when its personal meaning remains uncertain or inaccessible. Such socialization may thus contribute to the difficulty of distinguishing between socially inherited expectations and an individual desire for children. They also demonstrate that the reproductive question is not simply discovered in adulthood but installed early as a central dimension of identity.

This internalization of the so-called biological destiny of women is further developed in both texts' interrogation of women's social value outside of motherhood. Cusk's reference to Edith Wharton's 1905 novel *The House of Mirth* which "asks the question of wat a woman is if she is not a wife, a mother, a daughter" (Cusk, 2019, 51) finds a direct echo in Heti's narrator's anxious questioning of "What is a woman – who is not a mother – doing that is more important than mothering?" (Heti, 2018, 134). In both cases, the texts expose the cultural logic in which female identity and value remain relational and reproductive. However, the protagonist in *Motherhood* pushes this logic further. If refusing motherhood risks rendering a woman "the least important", motherhood itself does not guarantee significance either: "Yet mothers aren't important either. None of us are important" (Heti, 2018, 134).

Furthermore, they engage with feminist discourses that have sought to reclaim or reject motherhood. Cusk's view of motherhood as "a threat, a form of disability that marked me out as unequal" (Cusk, 2019, 7) resonates with the matrophobia of the second-wave feminism that positioned motherhood as the key site of women's oppression (O'Reilly, 2014, 7). Heti's narrator similarly resists alignment with contemporary empowerment discourses that celebrate motherhood as self-realization, hesitating whether a childless life can lead to fulfillment. Her recurring sense of a longing for "a holy completeness in the form of a child" (Heti, 2018, 101) echoes the myth of maternal fulfillment, yet the narrative interrogates and destabilizes this ideal by showing that such completeness remains imagined.

Their perception can be integrated in Rich's distinction between "motherhood" as patriarchal institution and "mothering" as women's own definition of care, which holds the potential for empowerment (O'Reilly, 2008, 3). Indeed, they are both entangled in patriarchal control, preventing them from reclaiming motherhood or the rejection of motherhood as a site of empowerment. This internalized patriarchal control can thus explain the matrophobic

comments often featuring in Cusk, such as “I often think that people wouldn’t have children if they knew what it was like” (Cusk, 2019, 136), and which readers received as shocking and offensive. In addition, Heti’s narrator questions the definition of mothering, responding to debates on Ruddick’s concept of “maternal thinking”:

> The hardest thing is actually *not* to be a mother. [...] There is always someone ready to step into the path of a woman’s freedom, sensing that she is not yet a mother, so tries to make her into one. There will always be one man or another, or her mother or her father, or some young woman or some young man who steps into the bright and shimmering path of her freedom, and adopts themselves as that woman’s child, forcing her to be their mother. (Heti, 2018, 168-169)

This passage illustrates the practice of mothering which Ruddick separates from biology, leading to the idea that anyone can mother and encouraging a shift of the term *mother* from a noun to a verb (O’Reilly, 2009, 296-297). Heti’s protagonist exposes the assumption that women are naturally caring and meant to be mothers, viewing both “motherhood” and “mothering” as an obstacle to her freedom. By refusing the association between being a woman and motherhood/ mothering, she goes along Ruddick’s wish to transform the term *mother* into a verb, advocating for a separation between being a woman and maternal practice in the collective imagination.

Both texts, from different positions, also foreground the social surveillance that accompanies reproductive decisions, going along Ruddick’s argument that mothers are controlled by “the gaze of others”, under which they feel determined in their value by society’s ideals (Bisht, 123). Cusk describes an acute sense of exposure: her privacy feels “populated” by strangers, as if she were “summoned by the tax inspector, isolated and searched” (Cusk, 2019, 40). This metaphor of intrusion conveys how motherhood renders the maternal subject publicly accountable, exposed to judgment and regulation. Heti’s narrator, by contrast, experiences this surveillance from the position of non-motherhood, anticipating how her choice will be “seen by the world” as being “wrong about such a basic thing” (Heti, 2018, 181). Despite these different perspectives, both texts converge in demonstrating that no reproductive decision escapes scrutiny: whether one becomes a mother or not, one always remains subject to external evaluation and criticized. These passages also expose how motherhood is not only personal but very social.

However, the narrator's reflections in *Motherhood* on her friend Nicola complicate this dynamic by explicitly resisting the assumption that reproductive choices function as implicit judgments of others: “Living one way is not a criticism of every other way of living. Is that the threat of the woman without kids? Yet […] her decision about her life is no statement about yours. One person’s life is not a political or general statement about how all lives should be” (Heti, 2018, 134). This statement challenges the logic through which women are positioned as mutual threats or “killjoys”. In this sense, Heti’s text engages with Ahmed’s concept of the feminist – or maternal – killjoy by suggesting that the discomfort generated by divergent life

choices stem less from the choices themselves than from the social frameworks that interpret them as normative statements. Rather than positioning herself as the killjoy who disrupts collective happiness, Heti's narrator exposes the conditions that produce such projections.

Both texts also engage critically with the myth of maternal happiness by dismantling expectations of emotional fulfillment. Heti's narrator anticipates that even the supposedly transformative moment of birth would reveal "nothing magical", only "plain old life" (Heti, 2018, 76). That fear finds its counterpart in Cusk's experience where such magic repeatedly fails to materialize: the cultural vision she has of the "early relationship between mother and child" does not "resemble [her] situation", where she describes her reactions to her daughter's behaviors as "random, off-key, and profoundly unmagical" (Cusk, 2019, 68). Heti's imagined disillusionment becomes Cusk's reality, creating a dialogue between the two texts. This parallel underscores how dominant narratives of maternal joy function less as descriptions than as prescriptions, shaping expectations that both writers ultimately resist. However, this resistance is not completely affirmed but creates an impression of being abnormal: "I know that other women derive feelings of fulfillment and well-being from breastfeeding. Why don't I?" (Cusk, 2019, 111). The question exposes the affective pressure underlying the ideal of maternal happiness: Cusk experiences an emotion that differs from the expected norm, and this difference is interpreted as a sign of personal inadequacy.

This dynamic can be understood in terms of affective injustice, a concept introduced in the previous section to describe the emotional burdens produced when self-help discourse imposes dominant emotional norms and dismisses experience that do not conform to them in the name of positive thinking (Latham et al., 12-16). Read alongside Ahmed's "killjoy" and Ngai's "ugly feelings", affective injustice thus further contributes to a reconsideration of the supposedly "negative" emotions represented in these texts. As discussed in Chapter Four, Ahmed already challenges the reduction of negative affect to personal failure by showing how the feminist killjoy emerges in response to the normative promises of happiness and exposes the conditions through which that happiness is sustained (17; 65-66). Ngai similarly gives political significance to "ugly feelings" as they emerge in contexts of restricted agency (3). Affective injustice adds another dimension to this rethinking by highlighting the emotional regimes present in self-help discourse through which certain affects become illegitimate or burdensome in the first place. These perspectives thus shift attention away from the presumed negativity of such affects towards the social and normative conditions in which they emerge. Rather than necessary signaling individual dysfunction or a failure to attain emotional well-being, such affects register a conflict between lived experience and the emotional regime imposed by dominant discourses.

Therefore, both narratives can be read through the lens of what Ngai describes as "ugly feelings". However, while many of the affects depicted by Heti and Cusk align with Ngai's emphasis on low-intensity, non-cathartic emotions, some exceed the framework in their intensity. Indeed, while the agitation in *Motherhood* more closely resembles Ngai's low-

intensity affects, Cusk's eruptions exceed this characteristic through their occasional explosiveness. Nevertheless, both texts construct agitation as non-cathartic affect, as it does not lead to decision or transformation but becomes another mode of affective impasse, and as emerging in a context of restricted agency. These moments of heightened distress or frustration suggest that the category of "ugly feelings" may need to be expanded to account for affects that, although more intense, nonetheless remain unresolved and politically inflected.

In the case of irritation, Ngai argues that it often appears as an affective state driven by a "quest" to assign an object (180). In *Motherhood*, this takes the form of an ongoing, unresolved quest to determine whether or not to have a child. The narrator's recursive formulations – "the right choices [...] for mysterious reasons [...], the wrong choices [...] for the right reasons. Yet we do not live for *the right reasons*, we live for our own reasons" (Heti, 2018, 176) – illustrate a circularity in which the quest is endlessly postponed, creating an ongoing dissatisfaction that dominates the book. In *A Life's Work*, Cusk's quest can be seen as the attempt to reconcile herself with motherhood and to become the kind of mother who feels naturally fulfilled. This desire, however, remains inaccessible. In this sense, the ugly feelings can be connected to what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism", where one remains attached to a desire that "feels further and further out of reach" (Cram, 371), sustaining attachment to the quest while simultaneously producing frustration. This connection is particularly visible in the following excerpt, where Heti's narrator listens to a man speaking about desires:

> He saw other people striving to build up their lives, moving to bigger cities, building admirable careers, buying cars and furnishings, cultivating grand connections and friends. *Desires build up lives*, he warned. He feared that if he began to follow his desires, he would end up buried underneath whatever they collected, until his whole self disappeared. There must be, in the puzzle of desires, some who wait out their days, and some who desire nothing at all. (Heti, 2018, 192)

Although Heti's text is constructed around the desire to arrive at a definitive answer to the question of reproduction – thus aligning with Berlant's notion of cruel optimism, in the sense that this answer is continuously deferred and generates frustration –, it gestures at the same time toward an alternative relation to desire. She suggests the possibility of refusing to accumulate desires and of becoming one of those who "wait out their days" rather than striving toward externally approved goals. In a neoliberal context that equates a meaningful life with the active pursuit and fulfillment of desires, this stance appears marginal and counterintuitive. The narrator's position thus remains ambivalent: while she is drawn to the idea of abandoning desire, she cannot fully inhabit it. She continues to pursue an answer, compelled not only by personal uncertainty but mostly by the social pressure to decide, to justify, and to give shape to her life in recognizable terms.

This tension nuances her relation to cruel optimism. The object of desire retains its hold precisely because it is socially reinforced as necessary. Implicitly, Cusk's narrative can be read in a similar way. Her continuous efforts to align herself with the ideal of the fulfilled, instinctively devoted mother suggests an attachment to a normative fantasy that remains unattainable. Yet this attachment is sustained by powerful cultural scripts that define what motherhood should be and feel like. In the absence of such prescriptive frameworks, rather than embarking on a "cruel" quest to reconcile herself with an ideal, she might instead have been able to recognize these affects as integral to maternal experience. In both texts, then, cruel optimism emerges not simply as a personal attachment but as a socially produced condition that binds subjects to desires they cannot fully realize.

Finally, both *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* can be situated in response to the contemporary transformations in reproduction, parenthood, and family structures outlined in Chapter One, although they engage with these transformations with different degrees of explicitness. While Cusk primarily registers their effects through a wish of changing family configurations and by exposing the persistence of social judgment, Heti more directly situates reproductive decision-making within broader conditions. Rather than presenting these shifts as either emancipatory or constraining, they both engage with them by foregrounding the ambivalences that structure these transformations.

Cusk's statement that "In my case a decision was made to demolish traditional family culture altogether, and it was regarded by other people with amazement, approval and horror" (Cusk, 2019, 13) summarizes this ambivalence. The coexistence of "amazement, approval and horror" mirrors the contradictory responses to changing family configurations: increased acceptance of diverse familial forms alongside normative expectations. Cusk's phrasing emphasizes that such transformations are not always liberating and remain socially contested, revealing how the expansion of possibilities does not eliminate judgment. The possibility of departing from traditional family norms therefore does not necessarily entail freedom from the expectations attached to them, as all choices remain subject to social evaluation. Cusk thus draws attention to the tension between the increasing availability of alternative ways of organizing family life and the persistence of the norms against which these choices continue to be measured. Furthermore, Houser's question "How free are the childfree?" (621) can be extended to ask more broadly: how free is any reproductive choice when it remains subject to persistent social expectations and judgment?

Heti's narrative engages more explicitly with the broader socio-political and economic discourses shaping reproductive decision-making. Her reflection that her thinking about children may stem from "losing faith in the bigger ideas – art, politics, romance" (Heti, 2018, 184) situates reproduction within a context marked by disillusionment and neoliberal individualization. Reproductive choice is commonly framed as embedded in a logic of self-realization and personal fulfillment; yet Heti reframes this "choice" as potentially cynical, even compromised. Her debate to have a child becomes entangled with a loss of belief in

collective projects, suggesting that reproduction for her would not function as a hopeful investment in the future.

Heti's narrator also directly engages with technological developments, particularly assisted reproductive technologies and their implications for kinship. The anecdote of the couple undergoing multiple unsuccessful rounds of IVF, only for conception to occur through a one-night stand (92), underscores the possibilities and failures of biomedical intervention. While IVF expands reproductive options, the narrative highlights its unpredictability and emotional cost, complicating any straightforward celebration of technological progress. Similarly, the account of the gay couple who have children through surrogacy reflects the diversification of family forms enabled by ARTs:

> Now they had two children from the womb of one woman, and the eggs of another [...]. The women weren't in the lives of the kids, because the men are lawyers, and they wrote up very strict contracts, he said. It had cost his friends a lot of money, particularly to the woman with the womb. *She was always saying, Oh my back aches, oh I need this, oh I need that.* I felt sorry for the woman, who was being portrayed in this way. (Heti, 2018, 92)

Yet the narrator's discomfort, particularly her sympathy for the surrogate who is "being portrayed in this way" draws attention to the inequalities underpinning such arrangements. This resonates with Chapter One's discussion of global surrogacy markets and the uneven distribution of reproductive labor, where the benefits of technological advancements can be entangled with classed and gendered exploitation. Heti's narrator simultaneously acknowledges the expansion of queer family possibilities and interrogates the economic and ethical structures that sustain them.

The protagonist's reflections in *Motherhood* also encompass environmental concerns, as already noticed in Houser's article. The narrator's claim that "nothing harms the earth more than another person" (Heti, 2018, 178) directly echoes the ecological anxieties and childfree discourses. Heti reframes motherhood not only as a private desire but as a decision with global consequences, weighing the value of bringing a new life into the world against alternative forms of care, such as adoption or financial support for "organizations that give women who can't afford it condoms and birth control and education and abortions" (Heti, 2018, 178). This ethical calculus disrupts pronatalist assumptions and aligns with reproductive justice frameworks that situate individual choices within broader socio-political conditions.

This expansion of "mothering" beyond biological reproduction is further articulated in the protagonist's assertion that "there are children everywhere, and so much work to be done [...]. The whole world needs to be mothered [...] There are lives and duties everywhere just crying out for a mother. That mother could be you" (Heti, 2018, 168). Here, motherhood is reimagined as a form of care detached from biological destiny, engaging again with Ruddick's distinction between motherhood and maternal practice. The use of the second person "you" creates an ambiguous address: it may be directed at the reader, as an ethical plea, or at the

narrator herself, as a form of internal persuasion. In either case, it destabilizes the boundary between personal reflection and collective responsibility, suggesting that care is not limited to one's own child but extends outward into the social world and challenging the traditional equation of femininity with biological motherhood.

9.3. Conclusion

By bringing together Sheila Heti's *Motherhood* and Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work*, this thesis has examined how contemporary maternal narratives represent experiences that resist the certainty and fulfillment conventionally associated with reproductive choice and motherhood. While the two texts address different moments in relation to motherhood – Heti's philosophical and affective uncertainty about whether to become a mother and Cusk's experiential shock and destabilization upon entering motherhood –, they reveal strikingly similar tensions. Heti's fragmented and recursive questioning and Cusk's overwhelmed narration constitute formally contrasting strategies, yet both ultimately refuse developmental resolution and formalize contradiction. Ambivalence is therefore not only a theme in these texts but a narrative principle that disrupts the teleological logic through which motherhood is conventionally made meaningful.

This formal resistance is inseparable from the texts' challenge to the discourse of idealized motherhood identified in Chapter Two through the overlapping myths of the 'self-sacrificing', 'fulfilled', 'natural', and 'super' mother. Heti most directly destabilizes the myth of the 'natural mother' by foregrounding the absence of desire for a child and that of the 'fulfilled' mother by challenging the assumption that motherhood constitutes a woman's ultimate achievement and source of happiness. She also confronts the myth of the 'self-sacrificing mother' by refusing to sacrifice her personal ambitions and artistic life for motherhood. Yet her refusal of these ideals is itself marked by doubt: the fear of writing as an insufficient form of alternative fulfilment does not entirely resolve the question of whether something is being lost through not becoming a mother. From her different perspective, Cusk challenges the myth of the 'natural mother' through an absence of instinctive maternal knowledge and her estrangement from the expected feelings of maternal love, while also exposing the ideal of the happy and fulfilled mother. At the same time, she comes closest to the self-sacrificing maternal ideal, but transforms its apparent virtue into a source of exhaustion and loss of the self. Finally, she unsettles the myth of the 'supermom', who manages all aspects of her life effortlessly and successfully, by featuring struggles in reconciling the competing demands of her life.

The affective experiences of the narrators are central to this demystification. Rather than reproducing the positive emotions conventionally associated with motherhood – love, joy, fulfilment, and sentimentality –, *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* foreground affects that are flat, agitated, and inhibiting. Read through Ngai's "ugly feelings" and Ahmed's figure of the killjoy, these affects are not understood as individual failures to achieve happiness. They register conflicts between lived experience and the normative expectations that determine

what reproductive and maternal experience should feel like. The concept of affective injustice further reveals how emotional regimes themselves contribute to rendering such experiences illegitimate and burdensome. The supposedly "negative" affects represented by the two texts thus become meaningful precisely because they expose the normative and oppressive conditions under which they are deemed negative. In this respect, both books expand the affective vocabulary and strategies available for articulating reproductive uncertainty and early motherhood, notably through metaphors and form.

The thesis has further demonstrated that these affective dynamics are closely connected to the self-help and therapeutic frameworks through which contemporary subjects are encouraged to interpret their experiences. These frameworks, in turn, can be situated within the broader "happiness turn", through which happiness, well-being and emotional self-management have increasingly become prominent objects of social concern (Ahmed, 3; 21). Both *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* engage with what Beth Blum terms "self-help hermeneutics" and with the related discourse of therapeutic writing. They seek guidance, interpretation, and self-understanding, but repeatedly frustrate the expectations attached to these practices. The divinatory systems in *Motherhood* generate interpretations without producing a definitive answer, and Cusk's engagement with parenting manuals similarly demonstrates how guidance can intensify rather than resolve self-doubt. While Heti's narrator introduces an alternative form of self-help that differs from traditional self-help books, the ending with both the intake of medication and the passing of time reveals that even these divinatory alternative discourses do not produce the expected result. Similarly to the resistance to self-help, writing does not straightforwardly transform or heal the narrators.

Nevertheless, the texts neither simply reject self-help and therapeutic writing nor reproduce their logic. They appropriate their reflective functions, while resisting their promises of progress, transformation, emotional regulation, and resolution. In this sense, they can be understood as forms of negative or ironic self-help: they offer recognition without requiring difficult experiences to culminate in improvement. They provide readers with alternative narratives whose insights may be used in processes of self-understanding and feminist emancipation, while resisting the self-improvement culture that seeks perfection. Their resistance to the emotional regime of self-help allows affects conventionally treated as problems to remain visible rather than requiring their transformation into more acceptable emotional states.

This reconfiguration of maternal experiences also needs to be understood within a broader contemporary context. Reproductive decisions are framed by socio-political, economic, and environmental uncertainties, and reproductive possibilities remain unequally distributed. The question of whether to become a mother can therefore no longer be separated from questions about what kind of future motherhood entails, for whom it is desirable or accessible, and under what conditions. Moreover, both texts suggest that the

increased availability of reproductive and familial choices has not eliminated the social norms through which those choices are evaluated. The expansion of possibilities can instead coexist with persistent inequalities, gendered expectations, and demands for individual responsibility. This is particularly relevant to the question raised by Houser concerning how free reproductive choices can be when they remain socially and affectively constrained. Heti's narrator and Cusk respond to these tensions without offering a definitive position on motherhood. Their narratives inhabit the contradictions of contemporary reproductive life: between autonomy and constraint, individual desire and social expectations, expanded possibilities and persistent norms, and private experience and collective structures. Consequently, their personal narratives of wondering and early motherhood turn into social critiques. By exposing the structures through which reproductive and maternal experiences are interpreted and judged, both texts respond to the contemporary conditions in which motherhood is lived rather than simply documenting individual experiences of it.

This may also help explain why narratives such as *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* remain particularly meaningful in the present moment. Their emergence cannot be separated from a cultural context in which questions that were once treated as self-evident – whether women should become mothers, for instance – have increasingly become objects of open debate and negotiation. Yet the persistence of maternal myths demonstrates that the expansion of choice does not automatically undo the cultural scripts through which those choices are understood. These myths remain embedded in the collective imagination, even as their normativity is increasingly questioned. The continuing appeal and necessity of such narratives therefore lie in their capacity to expose this contradiction. They reveal that contemporary motherhood is not simply characterized by greater freedom, but the expansion of reproductive choices alongside the persistence of deeply rooted expectations concerning desire, happiness, competence, and emotional fulfilment.

Ultimately, the comparison of *Motherhood* and *A Life's Work* suggests that rewriting motherhood does not mean replacing one ideal with another. Both Heti and Cusk demonstrate that maternal writing can challenge idealized representations precisely by refusing to produce a new normative model of what reproductive choice or motherhood should be. They create narratives in which paradoxical affects can remain unresolved, and in which personal narratives become sites for exposing the broader cultural, affective, and structural conditions through which contemporary motherhood continues to be experienced.

Further research could extend these findings beyond the two autobiographical texts examined here. A broader corpus including other forms of life writing or fiction could reveal whether the refusal of therapeutic and developmental resolution identified here constitutes a wider tendency in contemporary representations of motherhood. Even though self-help books are inherently prescriptive, it would also be valuable to examine how recent parenting manuals themselves have transformed in response to changing understandings of parenthood. Such approaches could further illuminate the relationship between evolving

representations of motherhood, contemporary self-help and therapeutic culture, and the emotional norms through which reproductive life continues to be imagined.

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