

# Radical Motherhood: Narcissism and Empathy in Russell Banks's *The Darling* and Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document*

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This article discusses constructions and representations of motherhood in Russell Banks's *The Darling* and Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document*. It argues that the theme of motherhood has a long, if often overlooked, presence in American literature, and that the two novelists use the figure of the mother in order to engage with the themes of empathy and community. The novels participate in familiar postmodernist practices, such as multiple, fragmented viewpoints and narratives, unreliable narrators, non-chronological storytelling and the mingling of fact and fiction. However, they do not wholeheartedly embrace two key postmodern issues: irony and loss of affect. Instead, they seek to move away from some of the postmodern novel's more excessive decathecting tendencies, and they achieve that through their representations of mothers who, in not acquiescing to society's norms, challenge gender roles and cultural assumptions. The two fictional mothers under discussion share a past as Weather Underground activists, and in giving voice to them and refusing to demonize them as "bad" mothers, their creators also seek to expose other American narratives that reinforce dominant ideology and suppress the margins.

Motherhood, according to Barbara Christian, "is a major theme in contemporary women's literature, the 'unwritten story' just beginning to be told."<sup>1</sup> While there can be little doubt that fiction written by women in the last few decades has indeed engaged with the theme more extensively than before, the story itself is not unwritten in American literature. Before Sethe, Hester Prynne must have been the most famous mother in American letters, while the images of the *Rachel* searching for her children and Eliza leaping over the ice are amongst the most powerful and memorable in nineteenth-century

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<sup>1</sup> Barbara Christian, "An Angle of Seeing: Motherhood in Buchi Emecheta's *Joy's of Motherhood* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*," in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey, eds., *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 95–120, 95.

literature.<sup>2</sup> But while Harriet Beecher Stowe not only created powerful fictional mothers, but also helped recruit women to the abolitionist cause by appealing to their maternal instincts, the social and cultural meaning of motherhood itself did not come under close scrutiny until Adrienne Rich published *Of Woman Born* in 1976. Meanwhile, arguably the most powerful and influential fictional representation of motherhood did not appear until the publication of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987. As the novel took on both race and motherhood, it demonstrated that historical and economic factors are as crucial in shaping one as the other. Since then, studies of maternal discourse in American literature have concerned themselves with female authorship and creativity, and have often centered on the marginalized ethnic subject. Barbara Christian, for example, reads Alice Walker's *Meridian* alongside Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* in order to highlight the ways in which "the experiences of enslavement, racism, sexism, and colonialism" have shaped representations of motherhood. More recently, Naoko Sugiyama has argued that ethnic-minority writers such as Leslie Silko have used maternal discourse in an attempt both to participate in and also to move beyond what she perceives as the nihilism of white male post-modernity. *Almanac of the Dead*, concludes Sugiyama, "is close to what may be called post-modern nihilism," but "the viewpoints of the unusual mothers and the novel's matrilineal text represent and organize chaotic and fragmented realities into a positive vision for the future."<sup>3</sup>

It is this "restorative" potential of maternal discourse that this article will explore further. It will argue that Russell Banks and Dana Spiotta use the figure of the mother/radical activist not only in order to rethink 1960s–1970s radicalism and its legacy, but also in order to reinvigorate debates concerning identity and the agency of the subject. The various narrative strategies used by Banks and Spiotta seemingly reinforce the notion, familiar from postmodern theory and practice, that the subject is a discursive construct, or a collection of fragments. The two novels show their mother figures to be self-questioning, self-inventing, often contradictory entities who are also products of socioeconomic forces and ideologies. However, the use of the

<sup>2</sup> In *Conceived by Liberty: Maternal Figures and Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), Stephanie A. Smith recalls the story of a senior colleague who could not think of a single mother in American literature. Smith suggests Hester Prynne, to which the colleague replies, "Oh, right," "but that's not what's really important about her, is it?" (p. 2). As this anecdote so clearly illustrates, what is "important" in a text is a function of the culture that receives it, and not of the text itself.

<sup>3</sup> Naoko Sugiyama, "Postmodern Motherhood and Ethnicity: Maternal Discourse in Late Twentieth-Century American Literature" *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 11 (2000), 71–90, 85.

theme of motherhood allows the authors to ask whether notions of ethical responsibility, sympathy and empathy can also be ascribed to a more essentialist human nature, represented here by motherhood itself, a condition that is both universal and biologically determined, on the one hand, and socially constructed and widely divergent, on the other. Both novels stop short of answering the questions they raise. What they do instead is highlight the need for community, human connectedness and emotion; qualities, in other words, that may offer a corrective to the ironic, cynical tones of much contemporary American fiction, and qualities that seek to counteract the “waning of affect” that Fredric Jameson so accurately described as one of postmodernity’s most prominent features.<sup>4</sup>

Though it may be too soon to tell whether this will constitute a major new direction in American writing, a similar drive has been identified in the work of other contemporary authors, such as Dave Eggers and David Foster Wallace, whom Spiotta lists as one of the writers she most admires.<sup>5</sup> Reviewing Eggers’s *Zeitoun* in the *New York Times*, Timothy Egan noted how the author is able to tell a good story “without any writerly triple-lutzes or winks of post-modern irony.”<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, though Wallace was rather fond of his “triple-lutzes,” he too, as James Annesley has shown, engaged in a “search for a synthesis between the elaborate codes of literary experiment and a plain and unreflexive humanism,” creating a world that was pessimistic, but “rarely cynical.”<sup>7</sup> In an assessment similar to Annesley’s, Paul Giles has remarked that Wallace’s work “seeks to construct a more affective version of posthumanism, where the kind of flattened postmodern vistas familiar from the works of, say, Don DeLillo are crossed with a more traditional investment in human emotion and sentiment.” Giles further argues that Wallace’s representations of sentiment are not backward-looking or nostalgic, thereby implying that there is, even in self-reflexive, elaborate and often playful structures, the possibility of sentiment without sentimentality.<sup>8</sup> Spiotta’s novels are less formally experimental than Wallace’s, but they are also better able to invest in human emotion through her treatment of the

<sup>4</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1992), 10.

<sup>5</sup> Angela Meyer, “Dana Spiotta – Interview,” available at <http://literaryminded.blogspot.com/2008/07/dana-spiotta-interview.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Timothy Egan, “After the Deluge,” *New York Times*, 16 Aug. 2009, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/books/review/Egan-t.html>.

<sup>7</sup> James Annesley, “Review Essay: David Foster Wallace” *Journal of American Studies*, 43, 1 (2009), 131–34, 131–32.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Giles, “Sentimental Posthumanism: David Foster Wallace,” *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 53, 3 (Fall 2007) 327–44, 330.

theme of motherhood. The figure of the radical mother that Banks and Spiotta use is in many ways the perfect vehicle for exploring what is constructed and what is innate. On the one hand, the radical fighter challenges dominant ideologies and orthodoxies, and seeks, often through violent means, to overthrow the status quo. The mother, on the other hand, has traditionally been represented as loving, nurturing and nonthreatening, embodying qualities in many ways incompatible with those of the radical fighter.<sup>9</sup> Yet just as feminist writing, memoirs and testimonials emerging since *Of Woman Born* have shown this type of mother to be largely a myth, so the figure of the radical is often a construct that obscures ideological and psychological conflict, and in conflating the two figures, Spiotta and Banks destabilize and interrogate the historical moments they revisit.

In the culturally sensitive post-9/11 climate, the two authors attempt to assess the impact of 1960s and 1970s radicalism; and in so doing, they humanize figures more often demonized in dominant discourse. Both novels employ a number of familiar postmodernist techniques such as multiple points of view, unreliable narration, nonlinear storytelling, merging of fact and fiction, and interactions between fictional and “real” characters. This might suggest that the two novels simply reiterate and reaffirm a form that has become something of a cultural dominant in literary fiction: the flat, affect-less postmodernism that deplores the state of the world while admitting its own powerlessness through a foregrounding of its own made-up-ness. Yet *The Darling* and *Eat the Document* actually seek to break free from the prisonhouse of postmodernist irony, self-referentiality and the rejection of any notion of authenticity. In very different ways, the novels both attempt to reintroduce some promise of human connectedness, empathy and affect. This article will examine motherhood in the novels in order to suggest that the trope of the unconventional mother is used not only as a means of interrogating orthodoxies, and demolishing binary oppositions, but also as an opportunity to reengage with values that postmodern fiction has been reluctant to address without a hefty dose of cynicism or irony.

It is always hard to determine when recent events become “history,” but it is interesting to note that *The Darling* and *Eat the Document*, two novels that seek to reassess the legacy of the radical politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, were published in the space of two years at the beginning of a new century. Russell Banks’s *The Darling* (2004) tells the story of Hannah

<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich notes that this construction of motherhood is the product of a patriarchal society, and a patriarchal culture that “has created images of the archetypal mother which reinforce the conservatism of motherhood.” Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 45.

Musgrave, a Weather Underground fugitive from justice who seeks a new life as wife and mother in Africa.<sup>10</sup> Dana Spiotta's *Eat the Document* (2006) tells the story of Mary Whittaker, Vietnam-era radical who goes on the run and seeks a new life as wife and mother in the American suburbs.<sup>11</sup> Despite the obvious similarities, each novel creates a wholly different context in which to offer such a reassessment, and each narrative is structured in different, though equally elaborate, ways. Banks's chosen context is Liberia: a choice that provides a clear link with his previous novels, and demonstrates his commitment to the story of race, which he considers the most important story in America.<sup>12</sup> However, the last page of the book contains an explicit and loaded reference to the attacks of 9/11, effectively recontextualizing the narrative and casting doubt on what had appeared to be its main thrust. Spiotta chooses the anticapitalist, antiglobalization movements of the 1990s as the vantage point from which to examine Vietnam-era radicalism, but the parallels between the antiwar protests of the 1970s and the climate surrounding George W. Bush's war on terror are not hard to infer.

Banks and Spiotta have both spoken about their interest in political issues, though neither of them would choose to be labeled a political novelist. In an interview with Liza Johnson, Spiotta explains her interest in homegrown terrorism in the post-9/11 world: "Certainly it's harder than ever to engage the idea of revolutionary violence, even if the intention is only property damage. It's hard to make it legible. But I always think the novelist should go to the culture's dark places and poke around."<sup>13</sup> She goes on to outline the research that helped her seemingly authentic re-creation of a particular cultural moment in US history, and she stresses the importance, to her, of anchoring her novels in specific, fully realized contexts. She concludes, however, that the meticulous research into the worlds of feminism and radical politics was not intended to aid the creation of overtly political fiction: "My intention is not to create an essay or a polarized, polemical, didactic fight," she explains. "For me, the primary focus must be words, sentences, paragraphs." Similarly, in "Literature and Engagement: The

<sup>10</sup> Russell Banks, *The Darling* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005). Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

<sup>11</sup> Dana Spiotta, *Eat the Document* (New York and London: Scribner, 2006). Subsequent references to this edition will be made parenthetically within the text.

<sup>12</sup> "I do believe that the history of race in America is a central history and that it's our master story," Banks told an interviewer in 2003. William Smith, "Transcript of Russell Banks Internet Talk Show," 15 Oct. 2003, available at [http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii\\_portfolio/talkshows/transcripts/Banks\\_transcript.pdf](http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii_portfolio/talkshows/transcripts/Banks_transcript.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Liza Johnson, "Dana Spiotta," available at [http://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview\\_spiotta](http://www.believermag.com/exclusives/?read=interview_spiotta).

Power of Words,” Banks makes a distinction between the author as individual, who is interested in promoting justice, human rights and equality, and the author as novelist, who is interested in words. “But a novel is not a vote,” he writes, “and a novelist writing is not a voter ... [a]nd he is certainly not a politician.” He goes on to dismiss the protest novel as “an argument disguised as a story, propaganda ... wrapped in narrative,” arguing that the novelist’s true task is “to dramatize first for himself and ultimately for the rest of us what it is to be human in our time and for all time, in our place and for every place.”<sup>14</sup> His thematic concerns, however, do point to a larger involvement in political issues than his essay might suggest. Apart from slavery, the Liberian civil war, the civil rights movement and the opposition to the war in Vietnam, which are some of the concerns *The Darling* explores, his other novels have dealt extensively with slavery, race, immigration and dispossession. In much of his writing, Banks has combined his interest in large political issues with postmodern formal experimentation while also exploring the need for community and empathy. As Anthony Hutchison has noted, this need has been a large preoccupation in Banks’s earlier novel, *Cloudsplitter*, where the author “imbues [abolitionist John] Brown with the qualities of the alienated outsider redeemed by a moral vision of fellowship and community.” Whilst the desire for fellowship and community does indeed run through this novel, as Hutchison also observes, Brown’s “politics of redemption is also presented as one indelibly tainted by violence.”<sup>15</sup> In this sense, *Cloudsplitter* shares many preoccupations with *The Darling*, whose main character is also an “alienated outsider” tainted by her involvement in violent political protest.

The two authors’ interest in and commitment to the literariness of their writing is evident in the novels under discussion, not only in the attention to the texture and nuance of language, but also in the structure and organization of their plots and the ways in which each novel’s formal qualities amplify the themes they explore. Above all, the two novels are interested in the articulation of the self in language and narrative, as well as in cultural and historical contexts. Banks, in using a first-person narrator–protagonist, poses questions about the relationship between narrated and narrating self, and complicates the already complex issue of his main character’s identity as daughter, mother and woman. Spiotta centers on a female protagonist whose voice is absent from the text: her life is narrated in the third person, and

<sup>14</sup> Russell Banks, “Literature and Engagement: The Power of Words,” *Salmagundi*, 157 (Winter 2008), 3–6, 3–5.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Hutchison, “Representative Man: John Brown and the Politics of Redemption in Russell Banks’s *Cloudsplitter*,” *Journal of American Studies*, 41, 1 (2007), 67–82, 80.

important insights into her character can be found in the parallel narrative of the lives of Henry Quinn and Nash Davis, and her son's first-person telling of the uncovering of her identity. In both cases, the identity of mother is one among many, rather than being the defining one in their lives. These women contain multitudes: they are self-absorbed rebels who, with dubious motives, leave behind comfortable backgrounds to join the fight for justice and freedom; they are mothers, and in the act of giving life and caring for another, they are selfless in the dual sense contained in that word: they are the opposite of selfish, but they also experience a loss of other identities, other selves, in becoming mothers. As a consequence, each author has the opportunity to contrast narcissism and empathy, and it is this contrast that embodies their contribution to a way out of some of the dead ends of postmodernism.

By narcissism, I mean three things: the scrutiny that comes with the articulation of self in fiction – first-person narration (in the case of Banks) or reinvention (in the case of Spiotta); the narcissism of the two women as radicals, and the suggestion that their political struggle was not motivated so much by a selfless desire to change the world for the better as by a need to assert their own identities and gratify their own egos; finally, narcissism is also a relevant concept in the sense that both novels attempt to differentiate between genuine political struggle and radical action on the one hand, and the affected disaffection of the fashionably concerned on the other. This final sense of narcissism also relates to the state of the postmodern novel as affect-less and self-regarding in its self-reflexiveness, and it is this aspect of late postmodernism that the two novels seek to leave behind.

Banks's novel examines the power and the meaning of empathy in an unexpected, unconventional way: the former Weatherman who by her own admission found "moral clarity in the phrase *by any means necessary*" (296, emphasis in the original) is not "humanized" by the experience of becoming a mother. She remains detached, from her own life and from the lives of those around her, and refuses to bow to the prescribed roles of wife and mother. She sets up a sanctuary for chimps, and appears more interested in the animals than in her husband and children, or any other human being. The question that Banks seems to be asking is how it is possible for a radical who fights an unjust system – presumably in order to change lives for the better – also to be uninterested in human connectedness. In attempting to answer that question (which in turn can help shed light on the cultural history of postwar America), Banks begins by rejecting any notion of a fixed or stable identity. Hannah Musgrave, who throughout her life has adopted different names and personae, is an unreliable narrator: she begins by

announcing that “most of the time, even now, I don’t want to tell my story” (31). Later on, when she recalls telling her life story to her future husband, she notes, “I had no choice but to alter, delete, revise, and invent whole chapters of my story. Just as, for the same reasons, I am doing here, telling it to you” (101). The story that she does tell does not unfold in chronological order, and as she revisits earlier chapters of her life, she does not always make it clear whether she is also revising her thoughts and feelings. This is perhaps what allows her to speak frankly about the experience of motherhood, and the ways in which it shaped her identity.

Hannah is in many ways a typical postmodernist narrative construct: an unreliable narrator who questions, revises and revisits the life that she recounts. At the same time, the novel employs other familiar techniques: the Liberia that Hannah inhabits in her African years is drawn realistically, with reference to real-life political events and place names. Charles Taylor, who at the time of writing this article is being tried for war crimes in neighbouring Sierra Leone, befriends Hannah and convinces her of the importance of his campaign to overthrow Samuel Doe. In a merging of fact and fiction that is typical of this novel, Taylor’s real-life escape from an American jail in 1985 is claimed by Hannah as her own doing. In one of the novel’s most daring moments, Hannah also admits that the two soldiers cutting off Samuel Doe’s ear in front of the camera (a video that does, indeed, exist) are her own sons. So far so E. L. Doctorow. Where Banks diverges from other authors who have used historiographic metafiction in order to highlight the ways in which we privilege certain types of discourse is in his use of Hannah’s narrative as a retrospective of her career as wife and mother. In reflecting on her shortcomings and attempting to account for her feelings and behaviour, her narrative adds an extra layer to the more familiar postmodern questioning that the techniques mentioned above promote. The narrative gives her the freedom to break taboos surrounding motherhood, and the blurring of fact and fiction that also defines her own unreliable telling allows her to express feelings and thoughts about being a mother that normally remain suppressed.

The novel opens with Hannah at the age of fifty-nine, living and working in Shadowbrook Farm in the middle of the Adirondack Mountains. She has a dream about Liberia, and soon after decides to return to her former home, ostensibly in order to find out what happened to her sons. The last time she saw them was during a traumatic event that ought to explain a lot of what came afterwards: leaving their well-guarded home, Hannah and her family are ambushed by a small gang headed by their chauffeur. Her husband is dragged out of the car, and beheaded with a machete in front of their three



children. As she runs back to the house to find the spare key for their gate, the children flee or are taken away and she never sees them again. Knowing that her husband's murder was politically motivated, Hannah soon realizes that her sons must have joined the rebels fighting against Samuel Doe, the dictator ultimately responsible for their father's death, but the full extent of the horror of what happened to her sons does not become clear to her (though it is hinted in her nonlinear narrative) until later. Despite the deep trauma that she and her children must have experienced, she is not afraid to admit that it was not them, or the memory of her husband, that really drew her back to Liberia: "On a deep – perhaps the most basic – level, my chimpanzees were drawing me back" (19). Her feelings for the animals she looked after remain strong when much else has faded with the passing of time, and looking back she is able to understand, though not to explain, her preference for these primates over her own babies: "The truth is, I wasn't as bad a mother as I probably sound now," she admits. "But nonetheless I was detached from my babies, detached in an unusual way, and I know this, and knew it at the time too, because, with regard to my chimps, I was not detached and could tell the difference" (167–8). Earlier in her narrative, Hannah makes a crucial distinction between "moral" and "psychological" or "emotional" sense (18), and this in many ways holds the key to her unconventional behaviour. She claims that her actions make emotional sense to her even though they do not make moral sense, and in this she appears to be capable of self-criticism, but also narcissistic. The word narcissism is explicitly mentioned in the narrative, but the book's title also offers an early hint to its significance, as does her realization at the end of the narrative that she was "an American darling," a privileged and spoilt woman rather than an agent of change.

*The Darling*, through the story of Hannah, assesses the legacy of 1970s radicalism, and seeks to find new meanings in it after the events of 9/11. In this context, Banks is able to combine larger insights into the old and new world order with an interest in the impact that history has on individual lives, and on how these lives have shaped history in turn. The Liberian setting allows the author to continue his investigation into America's racial history, and its transatlantic relations. As Liberia is destroyed by civil war, Banks examines how a country can destroy itself from within, while at the same time understanding that this inward destruction cannot be separated from larger transatlantic and longer historical factors. Meanwhile, Hannah's radical politics, and her involvement in the civil rights movement and the Weather Underground, are brought under scrutiny as the author implicitly asks whether her motivation was the common good, or just self-satisfaction. The

larger themes of self-destruction, seen in Liberia's civil war, the destructive parent-child relationship that characterizes the US's relationship with Liberia, and the motivation for Hannah's political activism are echoed in Hannah's feelings as mother and daughter. Hannah is depicted as a typical product of her times, shaped by environment and history: "I, too, was shaped, formed and deformed by time, place, and parents," she notes (170). But she is also a divided and destructive personality, so that her political struggle appears less motivated by a desire to better the lives of others, and more of a war waged against her family, her upbringing, and the roles expected of her as wife and mother.<sup>16</sup>

Hannah remembers her own mother as a self-absorbed person devoid of any sense of empathy. Early in life, she says, she discovered that "the only response useful to me was no response – it kept my emotions intact and still my own, and it punished her back, punished her for her self-absorption, her relentless shifting of the subject, no matter how dramatic, poignant, or dire, to herself" (260). Hannah is able to identify this type of egotism as a "metaphysical disfigurement" (260), but the extent to which she is similarly afflicted only becomes clear to her with the benefit of narrative retrospection. Meanwhile, the jumbled-up narrative of her life allows the reader to see how Hannah felt later in life before we find out how she had felt earlier. On page 270, she says that the "opacity of my mother's gaze deprived me of that certitude and security and made me resemble her." "Like my mother, I was incapable of seeing them [her husband and sons] ... Simply, they weren't as real to me as I was to myself," but fifty-one pages later, though referring to an earlier period, she also claims that Woodrow and the boys were "My true family. My best family" (321). These ambivalent feelings towards her mother, her husband and her children are contrasted throughout the book with the maternal care, affection and devotion she brings to her chimp sanctuary. This, in turn, is related to her radical politics. Hannah subscribes to the notion that the personal is the political, and sees human relationships as power struggles: "there are useful parallels in the relations between men and women, between whites and blacks, between people without disabilities and disabled people, and between human primates and non-human primates" (326). In this conception, empathy is not a deeply personal emotion, but rather an expression of a power struggle: "We who have more power in the world," she writes, "try to empathize with those who have less" (326). In trying to experience power struggle as a form of

<sup>16</sup> Hannah's father is a child-rearing expert who closely resembles Dr. Spock, a man held by many responsible for the "permissiveness" and "lax morals" of the 1960s and beyond.

empathy, Hannah learns an important lesson about herself: “When you abandon and betray those with whom you empathize, you’re not abandoning or betraying anyone or anything that’s as real as yourself. Taken to its extreme, perhaps even pathological, form, empathy is narcissism” (327). To suggest, as Hannah does here, that empathy can be a form of narcissism is to reach an important insight into her own actions as mother and as activist. As activist, she learns that the passionate identification with the oppressed is really a way of denying the reality of their suffering: by “feeling their pain,” she is hijacking an emotion to which she has no personal stake. When it comes to her children, though, empathy can acquire a different meaning, and it is here that Hannah hints at the complex forms that empathy can take. While the white, middle-class woman who feels the disenfranchised African American’s pain is narcissistic, the converse is true of the mother: it is the one who does *not* feel the child’s pain who is deemed narcissistic. As we will see later, Spiotta also questions the borders between empathy and narcissism with specific relevance to political activism, and both authors seem to suggest that there is a whole spectrum from the idealized selfless empathy of the archetypal mother to the disturbed psychological states of the narcissist, or the victim of a narcissistic culture.

Hannah’s inability to bond with her children and assume the role of mother is emphasized throughout the narrative. She writes of her first-born baby,

I tried ... I gazed unblinking into his eyes and tried to see him, truly see him, for what and who he was, a person separate from me and yet part of me ... and every time, my gaze came bouncing back, as if reflected off a hard, shiny surface. I was like Narcissus staring into the pool. (168)<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere, she admits to seeing her baby “as an alien, a member of a different, non-human species” (167). This detachment, and the willingness openly to admit it, can also be seen as symptomatic of the kind of affect-less world that Banks takes on in his novel. Hannah is not demonized for being a “bad” or “unnatural” mother. Instead, she is shown to be the product of a historical moment that allowed women to take on different roles, as well as being shaped by her parents’ upbringing, which is also typical of a certain class and time in America, as argued in Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). The novel offers no conclusive answers concerning the role

<sup>17</sup> Hannah is here talking about her inability fully to imagine other people’s otherness. However, her comments about narcissism can hardly be separated from her status as mother, since procreation itself can and has been seen as a form of narcissistic self-replication, a notion certainly familiar to Shakespeare when he urged the addressee of Sonnet 3 to have children lest his image die with him.

of women or the importance of motherhood, but it does offer a useful contrast between different types of community. Hannah seems most fulfilled looking after animals rather than her own children, and later in life she retreats into an all-women farm. In both cases, it is the structure of an unconventional community that suits her sense of identity, and the novel does not punish her for her rejection of traditional family structures. In other words, there is no suggestion that Hannah is a bad mother or a bad wife, and the narrative does not end in madness or suicide, as it might have done in an earlier era.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Hannah is shown to be typical of an American generation who sought to tear down institutions without thinking too much about what to put in their place. As her flight lands into a country newly traumatized by the events of 9/11, she realizes that hers had been a story that “could have no significance in the larger world. In the new history of America, mine was merely the story of an American darling, and had been from the beginning” (392). In this new post-9/11 climate, Banks seems to be suggesting, there should perhaps be more room for community and empathy, and less for the selfish (narcissistic) pursuit of self-determination that shaped the course of Hannah’s life.

Compared to Hannah Musgrave, Spiotta’s mother character, Mary Whittaker, appears initially as a weaker person. This is largely due to the fact that her story is not narrated in the first person, thus depriving her of Hannah’s authority, but also because more emphasis is placed on her relationship with a fellow activist whom she can no longer contact without fear of discovery. She is known throughout her life by different names, and like Hannah assumes different identities in order to escape the notice of the FBI. Her pre-motherhood years are recounted through third-person narration, in a tone that shifts often from intimate to detached, while her narrative present life as suburban mother is glimpsed through her son’s first-person journal entries. The story that emerges from Jason’s diary involves not only an indirect account of his mother’s humdrum existence, but also his growing suspicions, and the gradual uncovering of her identity before she became a mother. Though the novel does not have historical characters interacting with real ones, it is to some extent based on the story of Katherine Ann Power, who was placed on the FBI’s most-wanted list in 1970, but who managed to rebuild a life as small-town mother and wife until, in 1993, she turned herself in. The story of Katherine Ann Power captured the public

<sup>18</sup> I am thinking here of the two most famous punishments meted out to transgressive mothers, in *The Yellow Wallpaper* and *The Awakening* respectively.

imagination (she even made the cover of *Newsweek*), but little attention was paid to motherhood, for the simple reason that she became a mother after she had given up her former identity. Such is also the case with Mary Whittaker, or Caroline Sherman, but because the novel is not narrated in chronological order, her various pre- and post-motherhood selves are harder to separate.

The novel also tells the parallel story of her partner, Bobby Desoto, known in his new life as Nash Davis, and his friend Henry. Henry owns an “alternative” bookshop, Prairie Fire Books, managed by Nash. In addition to stocking “fringe texts ... books that advocated subverting the status quo, abolishing property and ownership, resisting American hegemony, and embracing rebellion and nonconformity of any stripe” (27), the shop provides meeting space for various small groups, “a sanctuary of subversion for misfits and scragglers” (35). This setting allows Spiotta to contrast “old-style” radical politics, as represented by Henry and Nash, with the beliefs and actions of Generation X, or younger, in the late 1990s: a generation whose “knowing,” “ironic” engagement with corporate capitalism and information technology barely masks their narcissism. This contrast also works as a mirror for the relationship between Mary and her son: he thinks he is the one with “alternative” beliefs and tastes because of his devotion to the music of the Beach Boys, and until he begins to suspect otherwise, he assumes his mother is just a boring, conventional housewife, and not a revolutionary and a killer on the run. The characters who frequent the bookshop, and the protests they get involved in, provide some of the most powerful, imaginative and memorable scenes in the book, while also amplifying the theme of the generation gap, and the permutations of political activism in the US. Nash applauds the younger generation’s desire to resist cultural hegemony, but, in terms that are strikingly similar to Hannah’s views on empathy and narcissism, he also finds them

entitled in this very dumb and tedious way. Oddly enough, for all their sarcasm and easy, shallow irony, there was still not enough self-reference for him, not enough wit. There was self-obsession, yes, self-consciousness, sure (after all, they always lived as though their lives were all on the verge of broadcast), but no concern with self-implication. (37)

The theme of self-obsession and self-implication is carried over into the narrative concerning Henry, who suffers from typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. For most of the novel, we are led to believe that he is a Vietnam veteran still haunted by the memories of what he witnessed in combat. Yet near the end of the book he reveals that he never went to Vietnam. The symptoms he suffers appear, instead, to be the side effects of

his anti-anxiety medication, the imaginatively named drug “Nepenthex.” Through Henry’s story, Spiotta foregrounds a narcissistic culture that consumes its own images in a way that turns empathy into a disorder. Henry is genuinely suffering from hallucinations, but the amount of detail he is able to report can only be the result of being exposed to media and cultural representations of the war in Vietnam. Henry is also an urban guerilla whose project is to deface or destroy large advertising hoardings that promote Nepenthex. In Henry’s character, Spiotta combines the various strands throughout the book that engage with the power of representation and the primacy of images, as well as the involvement of pharmaceutical companies in the pathologizing of everyday life. In feeling the pain of experiences he has not lived through, Henry appears to be suffering from empathy as a drug-induced disorder, and in her portrayal of his pitiable state, Spiotta offers a powerful assessment of American culture as inauthentic and affectless.

Henry’s extreme form of empathy is contrasted with the detachment and alienation felt by the younger generation in the book, though what unites their experience is the sinister presence of a large corporation, Allegecom. Allegecom makes the pills that cause Henry so much suffering, both real and “proxy” (163), and the same company is also investing in a gated community that in many ways epitomizes the opposite of everything Henry, Nash and Mary once fought for. One of the young activists who frequents Prairie Fire Books, Josh, begins by hacking into their website but ends up becoming an advocate for Allegecom’s new community; he is keen to subvert the system from within, but he ends up being swallowed by it. In Josh’s character, Spiotta offers a marked contrast between 1960s and 1970s activism, where the lines of opposition were fairly clear, and the far murkier world of the late twentieth century, where corporate capitalism is able to contain or assimilate its enemies, and still fool them into thinking that they are the enemy. In this conception of activism, the old-style radicals are motivated by empathy, whereas the younger generations are trapped in a self-referential, narcissistic world that coopts them at the same time that it gives them the illusion of freedom and rebelliousness. In one of the book’s most entertaining and insightful scenes, Josh takes fellow activist Miranda to a shop called Suburban Guerilla. Miranda is appalled at the commodification and commercialization of activism, but Josh appears to embrace it: “But you’re looking at it all wrong,” he tells Miranda.

“See, capitalism can exploit your desire and exploit your need to subvert its exploitation of your desire ... It embraces contradictions. It revels in irony.”

“No, that isn’t irony,” Miranda said. “That’s just cynicism. And it doesn’t contain contradictions. It just reduces everything to market value. It is simplistic and

reductive. The irony is there for you because you are alienated from it but still live in it. The irony is yours, not the system's." (258)

The difference between Henry's extreme "involvement" in events he did not live through and Josh's easy embrace of postmodern, late-capitalist irony echoes the story of Jason's relationship with his mother, and that mother-son relationship is crucial in promoting Spiotta's larger point about capitalism, alienation and disaffection.

Mary pays the price for having to go underground, and the book begins with an exploration of her feelings of alienation: "She knew all about the undoing of a life: take away, first of all, your people. Your family. Your lover" (3). From this early statement, it is clear that Mary derives a sense of self from the people around her, and by having to go on the run she gives up her identity not only as radical activist, but also as lover and daughter. She spends much of her life feeling lonely and isolated, cut off from like-minded people, and an impostor in other circles. When her son Jason is born, the experience transforms her in an unexpected way:

She realized that her despair came from not being truly known to anyone. She understood the animal need to be recognized, to be familiar to others ...

So was it any surprise that the event that changed her life was Jason? Here was a creature to love and look after in some *authentic*, permanent way. (232, added emphasis)

This is in stark contrast to Hannah Musgrave, who found the experience of pregnancy and childbirth alienating: "Giving birth," she confesses, "did remake me ... [b]ut it didn't make me more of a woman, as promised. It made me more of a stranger to myself ... Depersonalized. Objectified" (171). Despite Mary's more positive outlook, she too appears "depersonalized" to her son, who records in his journal that she is "the sort person who seems constantly to be halfway elsewhere" (23), later adding that "when [he] was a kid, [he] always had this idea that one day she might go out for a bottle of milk and never come back. She would disappear forever" (84). Jason's suspicions regarding his mother's past are aroused when she makes a comment about a song by his beloved Beach Boys, and later when she surprises him by saying that she had actually met one of them in a bar in Venice Beach in 1979. "It was pre-me," muses Jason, "my mother to be, how can I really imagine that? She is unformed, she is waiting-to-be in my mind" (86). Jason's reaction is, of course, typical of a teenager unable fully to imagine his mother before motherhood, but it also serves as a reminder of the ways in which Spiotta is concerned with the construction of motherhood as a condition that obliterates all previous states and selves. Jason's journal generally

reveals a sense of distance and bewilderment toward his mother, and even though Mary finds a sense of authenticity in motherhood, her hidden violent past does not allow her fully to connect with her son, or indeed her own life as mother, until the final pages of the novel, when he discovers her secret. He confronts her with a mixture of anger and admiration, and even though he says he cannot forgive her for lying to him, he does make a conciliatory gesture that links his forgiveness to the novel's theme of connectedness: he gives her the details of Nash's whereabouts, thus facilitating their reunion. The meeting between Mary and Nash at the end of the novel is a reunion that humanizes these "enemies" of the state. While the two have gone unpunished for the crime of detonating a bomb that killed an innocent person, they have paid in loneliness and alienation. Nash has attempted to overcome this through his involvement in the alternative communities fostered by the bookshop, while Mary has been granted some small measure of belonging through the experience of motherhood.

The fragmented, disjointed narrative and the multiple perspectives that make up this novel have centered on divergent as well as parallel lives in order to emphasize loneliness, companionship and connectedness. Thematically, *Eat the Document* has dealt with notions of companionship and belonging through an exploration of various alternative communities: the all-women commune where Mary takes refuge in her early days on the run, the protest groups that meet up at Prairie Fire Books, the sinister utopias dreamed up by Allegecom. None of these offer an opportunity for authentic connections, and perhaps ultimately it is the widowed mother and her teenage son who fare best in the novel. When Mary is unmasked, her real identity as radical killer on the run destroys the illusion of the happy family unit sustained by the suburban mother. However, this does not mean that the family end unhappily in every way. Her previously withdrawn and alienated son is, of course, angry at her deception, but he also admits his admiration for her idealism, and for her courage to follow her convictions. By putting her in touch with Nash, he makes a gesture of reconciliation, even though it turns out to be one that leads to their surrender and arrest. Whereas the mother-son relationship does offer a possibility of hope, the plot does not allow them a conventional happy ending. Nash, Mary and Jason do not live happily ever after as a reunited family, because they are characters in a novel that does not privilege the traditional American family model.

In *The Darling*, Banks has similarly explored connectedness and empathy through various communities such as the American family, the traditional Liberian family, the chimp sanctuary in Africa and the all-female farm in the Adirondacks. Again, the novel does not privilege a right or ideal community,



nor does it condemn Hannah for her feelings and actions. Banks's and Spiotta's novels use the theme of motherhood to inject a dose of humanistic concern for companionship and empathy into the postmodern novel, and they succeed because they deal with constructions of motherhood rather than motherhood itself as a universal condition of benevolence shaped by biology and instinct. In *Motherhood and Representation*, E. Ann Kaplan spoke of texts that either reinforce or challenge dominant ideologies concerning motherhood as "complicit" and "resisting" texts. *The Darling* and *Eat the Document* are, of course, "resisting" texts,<sup>19</sup> but their wider contribution to the literary landscape of the early twenty-first century lies in the fact that this resistance to idealized forms of motherhood is part of a larger assessment of the political and cultural resistance of the 1960s and 1970s, accomplished in books that manage to convey a sense of hope without resorting to falsely upbeat endings.

<sup>19</sup> E. Ann Kaplan, *Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama* (New York: Routledge, 1992).