In 1999, Valérie Dumeige and Sophie Ponchelet published a volume of interviews with six women whose photographs appear on the cover of the book as six rectangles of equal size. Each one is the subject of one of the six chapters.1 The short summaries provided before each testimony reveal that two of the young women were born in Senegal, one in Vietnam, one in Algeria, and two in Romania. The status of their nationality varies but they all reside in France permanently and some of them have been in the country for more than 20 years. Across the obviously multiethnic and multicultural collection of portraits, the title stands out, in triumphant, perhaps defiant tall bold letters: FRANÇAISES [FRENCH WOMEN] (Dumeige and Ponchelet, 1999).

The fact that the cover and title intertwine nationality, gender, and ethnicity is obviously worth noting as a sign of the times and perhaps as a symptom of the changing relationship between a historically universalist French tradition and two categories (gender and ethnicity) that challenge, in different ways, the utopian ideal of a genderless and, even more persistently, raceless Republican subject. French Feminists of the seventies had loudly called into question the illusory representativity of a supposedly genderless but often male subject. But they had perhaps not as successfully solved the difficulties of what Christine Delphy calls “the management of multiple and irreducible forms of oppressions” that cut across other types of economic or ethnic identification (Delphy 2001, 361). As Delphy puts it in her recent book L’ennemi principal, “The smallest common denominator, the ‘universal’ feminine condition on which the feminist movement based its analyses, has too often been that of the prototypical woman who was often implicitly white, explicitly heterosexual, and some would add ‘bourgeois’” (Delphy 2001, 360).2

The reduction of women to a “prototypical” heterosexual bourgeois white woman denounced by many feminists now appears as a historically dated proposition, as one specific and nonrepresentative combination of identification markers (Spivak 1992, 1999). Today, it would sound conservative, even old-fashioned to ignore the increasingly audible voices of women who emphasize the diverse national, cultural, or ethnic heritage of all the women who live and work in France.
But which rhetorical and narrative tactics do cultural agents use when they seek to address the issue of multicultural gender within a traditionally but evolving universalist context? Which strategies of representation must contemporary authors invent or adapt once they have decided to pay attention to types of identification markers that were traditionally ignored by Republican discourses?

This essay proposes to focus on two types of narratives generated by individuals who seek to recombine the categories of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. In the first part, I focus on contemporary reconfigurations of what is perceived as France’s multiculturalism: descriptions of today’s encounters between gender and race belong to the same regime of truth, and they invent the present as much as describe it. A French gendered mosaic gradually emerges, complete with proposals about what is and what should be, what is politically and ethically desirable or undesirable. These visions of the present are only possible because of a reevaluation of the national past, and especially of the last years of the colonial era. The second part of this essay is therefore devoted to what we could call the reinvented genesis of the gendered mosaics. Women whose present and past were assumed from their visible (or invisible) minority status are adding their voice to the mosaic. Their narratives are fascinated by the figure of the mother, or rather by a very specific type of ethnicized and politicized motherhood. These autobiographies participate in the construction of the contemporary gendered mosaic by highlighting aspects of the past that radically changed the mythical perception that the public had of the relationship between typical “French” feminists of the seventies and ethnicity. The factor that remarkably unites both perspectives (in the present and in the past) is that the new parameters affect both “minority women” and women who have always been constructed as “French feminists” and whose ethnicity was considered irrelevant.

I. Contemporary Gendered Mosaics

The presence of new critical parameters appears in new types of arguments or tropes of representation (they are not a function of the speaker’s opinion): the same rhetorical tools serve to produce pessimistic as well as optimistic visions. While Dumeige and Ponchelet obviously celebrate what they perceive as the unmistakable existence of new multicultural encounters, others denounce the French resistance to ethnic integration, their racism, and their xenophobia. Françaises has a pessimistic counterpart in Calixthe Beyala’s Lettre d’une Afro-Française à ses compatriotes, an angry denunciation of the limits of universalism (Beyala 2000). The book was written in the wake of the public controversy started in February 2000, when the famous novelist of Cameroonian origin staged a well-calculated interruption of the twenty-fifth annual “night of the Césars,” the highly ritualized equivalent of the American Oscars. Accompanied by Luc Saint-Eloy, a Caribbean playwright, comedian, and director, she interrupted the live ceremony attended by a large audience of media celebrities and also by political and administrative decision makers. They both read from a prepared statement critiquing the lack of adequate representation of “visible minorities” in French television programs, and demanding “a genuine representative of France’s multiracial reality in all the medias.”

Both speakers presented themselves as two “black” people. For Saint-Eloy and Beyala, origin was obviously less significant than blackness, itself presented as a