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Université François-Rabelais, Tours, 3rd-5th April 2017

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Mother Figures and Representations of Motherhood: Contemporary Perspectives / Représentations et figures de la maternité aujourd'hui

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Jessica Houlihan

- 1 Throughout the history of English-speaking societies, mothers have occupied a contradictory space in political and popular culture. Often regarded as the pinnacle of “correct” womanhood, motherhood broaches a complex dialectic between gender politics and personal autonomy. As a subject and thematic concern, motherhood must therefore be approached by scholars as an institution, an ideology and as lived experience. The “Mother Figures and Representations of Motherhood in English-speaking Societies” conference, hosted by the Université François Rabelais and organised by Professor Fabienne Portier-Le Cocq and Dr Cécile Coquet-Mokoko, offered a range of innovative and interdisciplinary perspectives on motherhood. Representations and accounts of mothering were considered in relation to race, gender, class, sexuality and religion, and the role of the mother contextualised and politicised in terms of social policy and reproductive rights. While varied in nature and capacious in their scope, a salient theme among all papers was motherhood as a site of conflict between disempowerment and agency.

Day One: Monday 3rd April

- 2 Professor **Martine Sagaert's** (Université de Toulon) keynote address, “Procréation et création, de Simone de Beauvoir à Marie Darrieussecq” was a fitting opening to the conference. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949), Sagaert discussed the “constructedness of womanhood” and the central issues that mothers

continue to face nearly 70 years after Beauvoir's work first appeared. Her paper elucidated Beauvoir's claims that pregnancy and motherhood are experienced differently depending on whether they take place in rebellion, resignation, satisfaction or enthusiasm. She also broached the paradoxes of the pregnant body, whereby a woman can feel both fuller and maimed, that she possesses and is possessed by her child. Sagaert's paper also introduced contextual comparisons between the women's liberation movements that mobilised in the US and in France, exploring the impact such movements had on the social, political and economic conditions of motherhood.

1. "Representations of Motherhood"

- 3 The first two panels of the day addressed representations of motherhood in literary, film and media cultures. **Ilana Larkin's** "The Emotional Life of Food: Mothering, Eating and National Identity" (PhD Candidate, Northwestern, USA) held a contemporary interest, focusing on popular food blogger and self-fashioned "Pioneer Woman" Ree Drummond.¹ Larkin explored how this mother's seemingly innocuous blog promoting "simple country living" is heavily underscored by considerations of national identity, race, class and nostalgia. Larkin claimed that food is saturated with continually changing cultural meaning, and food preparation itself an inherently political ideology in which certain erasures are enacted in the wider narrative of the American kitchen. Dr **Anne-Lise Marin-Lamellet's** (Université Jean-Monnet, Saint-Etienne) paper then took us across the Atlantic, away from the middle-class American blogosphere, to examine "The Mother and the Whore: Working Class Motherhood in British Cinema (1956-2016)." Marin-Lamellet highlighted the matrilocality of working-class households in British film, and a recurrent binary opposition between working-class mothers' "warmth" and middle-class mothers' "coldness." This paper was complemented by **Kira Hussing's** "Maternal Conflict in Contemporary Irish Film" (PhD Candidate, Maynooth University, Ireland). With her analysis of *Glassland* (2014) and *Mammal* (2016), Hussing utilised E. Ann Kaplan's categories of "bad mother" to assess the religiously informed relationship between "mothering and morality" in contemporary Irish cinema, while insisting that the films offer a more nuanced view of motherhood than the categories imply. In keeping with the theme of the "bad mother," **Emma Heishman's**, "Motherlove was a Killer: Representations of Black Motherhood in the Media" (PhD Candidate, Aix-Marseille Université) introduced considerations of race and violence. Heishman posited that, while motherhood is traditionally framed as antithetical to violence, African American mothers have frequently been excluded from this non-violent ideal. She argues that black female characters on screen are often reformulations of the "mammy," "jezebel," "matriarch" or "welfare mother" image, reinforcing pejorative stereotypes of the "black mother as bad mother." Heishman draws attention to the highly praised *Precious* (2009) and *Moonlight* (2016) which, despite their critical success, continue to reinforce these types.
- 4 The second panel of the day continued the focus on representations of motherhood, beginning with Dr **Anne Sweet Fédé's** "When an 'Action Chick' Gets Knocked Up: Pregnancy, Motherhood and Televised Action Heroine" (Ponts et Chaussées). Despite the rise of "Girl Power" as a commercial phenomenon in the 1990s and 2000s, and the emergence of characters who married sexual attractiveness with heroism, Fédé argued that their empowerment as women often found itself at odds with their disempowerment as mothers. Her analysis identified four distinct tropes among her chosen texts:

motherhood as the loss of mastery over one's own body; childbirth as horrific; mother's giving birth to supernatural or alien babies; and mothers being either poorly portrayed or dead. She also noted that, while these shows did not shy from a more realistic portrayal of the symptoms of pregnancy, this was often used for comic effect. Dr **Charles Joseph's** "Super-Moms: Mothers and Motherhood in American Comic Book Culture" (Université Rennes 2) addressed similar themes of motherhood and heroism. Like Fédé, Joseph identified four defining tropes in the representation of mothers in comic book culture: mother gives up child; mother gives up career (he notes there is no equivalent of this for father superheroes); mother repeatedly puts child at risk; mothers cast as purely monstrous, evil, neglectful or absent. A fundamental question emerged from Joseph's work, one central to wider scholarship on "the maternal": do we trivialise motherhood if it is not presented as a giant cosmological change for a woman, or does it allow her to be an individual first, and not a mom? With "Postcolonial Economics and Motherhood from Emecheta and Adichie," Professor **Laurie Edson** (San Diego State University, USA) shifted our focus to the portrayal of motherhood in Nigerian literature. Centring her work on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Edson identified the mother as a nexus between the private violence of the domestic space and the public violence of the post-colonial state.

2. Mothers' Unseen Economic and Cultural Transmission

- 5 Continuing with the topic of economics, Dr **Coralie Raffenne** (Université Paris-Dauphine) delivered a paper on "Feminist Economics and the Deconstruction of Mothers' Soluble Self." She demonstrated the ways in which prevalent economic models are sustained by a dichotomy between (male) productive labour and (female) reproductive labour. Raffenne suggested that this paradigm promotes the "Rational Economic Man," able to detach "self" from the market, and the "Mother" who exists as a soluble self. According to Raffenne, it is the objective of feminist economics to fashion alternative methodologies in order to overcome the patriarchal bias of these neoclassical models. **Kasia Choluj's** "Reinventing Mother Pole / Matka Polka through Home-making and Parenting Practices in the New Polish Diaspora in Britain" (PhD Candidate, University of Kent, UK) took us from discussions of economic transmission to cultural transition. Choluj introduced us to the symbolic "Mother Pole," a cultural script configuring Polish mothers into moral guardians of Polish nationhood and Catholic faith. **Toni McCallum's** case study "Intersectionality in Race, Class, Gender: Co-Mothering in Logan, Australia" (PhD Candidate, University of Newcastle, Australia) held a number of distinct parallels with work on co-mothering practices in African American communities, in particular Carol B. Stack's 1974 ethnographic study *All Our Kin* and Patricia Hill Collins' seminal *Black Feminist Thought* [1990]. McCallum's research found that community mothering was prevalent in black, minority and working-class families, and served as a strong counter to the white, middle-class model of intensive mothering. McCallum suggested that othermothering in these communities functions as a form of social citizenship and that, for most mothers, work is an extension of their mothering, not the antithesis to it.

Day 2: Tuesday 4th April

3. Biopolitics/Biosocial: Rethinking Motherhood

- 6 Day two of the conference began with the second keynote address, delivered by Professor **Val Gillies** (University of Westminster, UK) and Professor **Rosalind Edwards** (University of Southampton, UK). In “(M)othering and the Politics of Early Intervention: Biologisation and the Reproduction of Gendered, Classed and Raced Inequalities,” Gillies and Edwards discussed the policy of early intervention in child development, arguing that this strategy—while ostensibly positive—contains an inherent neuro-sexism. They suggested that concepts of early intervention manipulate tenets of brain science into a new mechanism for “mother blaming,” holding them responsible for a child’s ills and pathologies. Gillies and Edwards claim that while grounded in scientific principles, the theoretical applications of early intervention are largely based on myth. Their research also highlighted that early intervention is based on a white, middle class, Eurocentric model of motherhood, which ignores alternative cultural values and care-giving practices, even highlighting some as a potential “risk” to children. From neuroscience to maternal care, **Cigala Peirano’s** paper then addressed the “Medicalisation of Maternity in Brazil and Chile” (Master's degree, Université Paris 8/UFSC Brazil). Peirano argued that maternity began to be conceptualised as a medical issue in Chile and Brazil during the early 20th century, coinciding with the emergence of the nation-state and increased urban development. In turn, “transgressive” practices, families and sexualities began to be policed by the state, an initiative that was both hygienist and eugenicist in nature. In “Beyond Public Health: How Mothers in Quebec relate to Breast Feeding,” **Annick Vallières** (PhD Candidate, Université de Montréal, Canada) explored the axiom of “breast is best” as a combination of medical science and moral injunction. Her case studies problematised both medical and cultural narratives of “correct” breast feeding practices, and interrogated the ways in which the positioning of women on axis of social oppression affects breast feeding attitudes.

4. Unsettling Mother Figures and Unsettling Rhetoric

- 7 In the first of this panel of papers, Dr **Rachel Jarvie** (University of Exeter, UK) discussed “Renewed Older Motherhood: A Qualitative Exploration.” Her case studies consisted of nine narrative interviews with British women, all of whom had given birth over the age of 35 and had at least a ten-year age gap between their children. All subjects had experienced negative criticism from friends and strangers, which Jarvis linked with media narratives and attitudes within the medical profession. With age a multifarious source of stigma for many mothers, **Sarah Bekaert** (PhD Candidate, City University, UK) addressed the socio-political responses to teenage pregnancy in Britain. In “Why Do I Always Become Pregnant when I’m on the Pill? Legitimizing Narratives, Contemporary Expectations, Silencing Teen Mothers,” Bekaert explored the impetus of the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy 1997, an initiative that was slightly devolved following a change of government in 2010. She explained how these social policies, and the rhetoric surrounding them, often silence and disempower the voices of teenage mothers themselves. **Joelle Bradley’s** “Alternative Narratives of Teenage Motherhood” addressed similar themes, this time from the perspective of a UK Activist. She described how teen

parenthood is frequently associated with poor health, lower education and fewer economic opportunities, with emerging studies on the positive experiences and benefits of young motherhood largely ignored by policy makers. But Bradley's work also highlighted the emergence of alternative spaces for these affirming narratives on social media. In "Mother Figures Behind Bars: Pregnant Women in English Prisons," Dr **Katherine Albertson** (et al.) (Sheffield Hallam University, UK) discussed the "double deviancy" of mothers in prison. With women in prison "bad mothers" by definition, Albertson's research explored this in relation to the competing discourses around the "correct nurturing environment" for child development, and the dominant idea that a mother and child should not be separated.

5. Rights and Issues / Rights and Ethics

- 8 Dr **Eva-Sabine Zehelein's** "Her Uterus, My Baby': Gestational Surrogacy and Reconceptualisations of Motherhood" (Goethe Universität, Frankfurt, Germany) examined the Intended Parent memoirs of U.S. women who had received a child through surrogacy. Zehelein explained how surrogacy, while against normative institutional understandings of motherhood, serves as a form of agency for women who can't conceive, and a means of circumventing biological restriction. Zehelein's study drew attention to the class disparity between the biological and surrogate mothers, with surrogacy itself in many ways a commercial enterprise. She also highlighted the discourses of incomplete motherhood for both women; a biological mother who did not give birth and a surrogate mother who cannot fulfil a maternal obligation. This was followed by a paper from Dr **Florence Binard** (Université Paris-Diderot) on "Lesbian Motherhood: Lesby-boom, Comparison between Britain and France." Binard's work addressed the socio-historical trajectory of rights for lesbian mothers, and identified the decriminalisation of homosexuality, introduction of more progressive abortion laws and increased access to contraception as key factors affecting the "lesby-boom"; if heterosexual women could choose not to have children, by extension lesbians could choose to have them. Dr **Anthony Castet's** "Lesbian Mothers and Citizens: The Morality Test at the Supreme Court of the United States" (Université François-Rabelais, Tours) then approached the rights of lesbian mothers in relation to the federal judicial system. With same-sex marriage a key tenet of the American "culture wars," Castet explored how this paradigm catalysed traditional moral discourses whilst also providing a platform for lesbian mothers. Drawing on the precedents set by *DeBoer v. Snyder* (2012) and *Obergefell v. Kasich* (2015) Castet argued that the democratisation of the matrimonial institution is only the first step in establishing equality for lesbian mothers. In a shift from the legal to the literary arena, Dr **Sophie Large** (Université François-Rabelais, Tours) then discussed "Atypical Mothers in the Novels of Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro." Large claimed that this Puerto-Rican author's novels offer non-hegemonic representations of motherhood in the form of lesbian, lone, plural mothers, and in doing so present a critique of mono-maternalism as an ideological doctrine at the intersection of patriarchy, heteronormativity, capitalism and Eurocentrism. She cites motherhood in these novels as a locus of conflict, power relations and frustration, and a not always positively represented experience. Large suggests that the narratives are, to an extent, reliant on patriarchal models and heteronormative clichés, and claims that these models are rooted in internalised heterosexist thought-patterns with both colonial and class dimensions. She identified the

boom of evangelical churches in Latin America and the Caribbean as a significant influence on these patterns and trends.

Day three: Wednesday 5th April

6. Religious Traditions and Constructions of Motherhood/Maternity

- 9 Continuing the focus on religion, the final panel began with “On the Wet of the Womb: Constructions of Mothers in Anti-abortion Action in the UK.” Here, Dr **Pam Lowe** and Dr **Sarah Jane Page** (Aston University, UK) explained that, despite high support for abortion in the UK, there has been a significant rise in anti-abortion activism outside clinics, a phenomenon derived from similar practices in the United States. Their ethnographic project consisted of observations and interviews, and found that most activists were Catholic. Cognisant of the fact that religious discourses were unlikely to be effective in the secular climate of the UK, these participants often employed biologically-based arguments in their literature that personified the foetus. They found that the mothers themselves, however, were often the main focus of the campaigns, which sought to “reawaken” a supposed latent maternal instinct and convince them that abortion would violate something basic in their nature. In “That Motherhood Fails to Be Adequately Supported by the State Exemplifies the Lack of Social Services—and Benefits—in the Republic of Ireland,” Professor Philippe Brillet (Université François-Rabelais, Tours) assessed the reasons for motherhood remaining a “low-key issue” within the Irish political space. He suggested that, with the pre-eminence of the Catholic faith, reproductive rights continue to dominate political discourse, while poverty, housing and lack of social services continually fail to be addressed as “family issues.” The conference closed with a paper from Dr **Élisabeth Bouzonviller** (Université Jean-Monnet, Saint-Etienne) on “Female ‘Transformational Energy’ in Louise Erdrich’s Works.” Here Bouzonviller addressed motherhood in Native American literature, and in particular the impact of colonisation and Christianisation. She argued that the novels and autobiographies of Louise Erdrich offer a counter to WASP models of mothering, instead focusing on female power and mothers as agents of transmission, resilience and healing. In doing so, Bouzonviller suggests, Erdrich is not only presenting an alternative to white Eurocentric models of motherhood, but these maternity patterns also offer an alternative narrative of American history and society.

NOTES

1. <<http://thepioneerwoman.com/>>

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