

Points of Exit:

(Un)conventional Parenthood: Unromantic Representations of Motherhood and Fatherhood in Contemporary Western Societies

On Thursday, March 19, and Friday, March 20, 2009, the Centre for Gender and Diversity, Maastricht University, the Netherlands, will mark its ten-year anniversary with a conference entitled *Points of Exit: (Un)conventional Representations of Age, Parenting, and Sexuality*. The conference aims to examine the potential deconstruction of conventional scripts of age, parenting, and sexuality.

For one of the panels, entitled *(Un)conventional Parenthood: Unromantic Representations of Motherhood and Fatherhood in Contemporary Western Societies*, we invite papers that focus on cultural representations of problematic aspects of white, middle class motherhood and fatherhood in contemporary, Western societies.

The starting point of this panel is the observation that parenthood has - in several Western countries - been frequently represented as a pleasurable and individually satisfactory experience since the 1980s. This is especially the case in relation to motherhood, although the ideal is also on the rise for fathers. Moreover, the ideal of enjoyment is a white, middle-class norm, which is particularly articulated in relation to babies and toddlers. In her analysis of representations of the white middle-class family in for instance English films and advertisements, Deborah Chambers (*Representing the Family*, 2001) shows that children have been represented as objects of personal pleasure in recent decades. In *The Mommy Myth* (2004) Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels confirm that the ideal of enjoyment is normative when it comes to motherhood in the United States these days. Judging from Dutch material, this is also the case in The Netherlands. Since the late 1970s, educational advice has highlighted the enjoyment of children as an ideal for parents, as Janneke Wubs has shown (*Luisteren naar deskundigen*, 2004, p. 211, p. 216).

Although this normative discourse of enjoyment is widespread, 'darker' aspects of parenthood are also expressed abundantly, ranging for instance from gloomy novels about mothers and fathers who kill their children, advertisements for treatments of postnatal depression, discussions about the problematic combination of work and care, to comedy series and movies about dysfunctional families. This contrast gives rise to an interesting field of tension and begs the question how such darker sides of bearing and having children are represented in relation to the more idealized representations of motherhood and fatherhood. Are these representations points of exit or do they perhaps reproduce romanticized notions of parenthood *ex negativo*?

Contributors to this session are invited to focus on this question and to perform an analysis of one or several case studies in which parenthood is represented in problematic terms. Topics can range from representations of parenthood in literary fiction, poetry, visual art, film to TV-shows, magazines, policies etc. Contributions in which both representations of fatherhood and motherhood are taken into account, as well as their relationship to each other, are highly appreciated.

Keynote

Confirmed keynote speaker for the panel is Deborah Chambers. She is Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at Newcastle University. Her research in the sociology of culture and media focuses on gender, identities, the family and cultural theory. *Representing the Family* (2001) examines official, media, and domestic discourses of family values. *Women & Journalism* (2004 with Steiner and Fleming) provides a comparative analysis of women in journalism in USA and Britain. *New Social Ties* (2006) explores contemporary debates in social and cultural theory concerning the impact of new communication technologies on social networks. Professor Chambers is currently writing a book on the Sociology of Families (Polity).

Send in a 500-word abstract and a short bio to info-gender@cgd.unimaas.nl (subject heading: "Unconventional Parenthood") before November 1, 2008.

We aim at publishing a selection of conference papers in a special issue of a peer-reviewed journal.

For further information on the *Points of Exit* conference, see: www.genderdiversiteit.nl/pointsofexit/.