
Urban Ecologies of Gender

Discussant: Marika Cifor, MA and MS candidate, History and Library and Information Science, Simmons College

Panel Summary: Jess Deshayes, MA candidate, Gender/Cultural Studies, Simmons College

Panelists:

Maria Diaconu, PhD candidate, American Literature and Culture, Heidelberg Center for American Studies

"New Mothers on the Blog: Reconfiguring Urban Femininity in the Digital Age"

Elizabeth Wilkinson, PhD candidate, Literature and the Environment, Yale Divinity School

"Urban Wombs: What a Uterus Can Say to Space, Order, and Creation World"

Fadia Hasan, PhD candidate, Communication, UMass Amherst

"Urban Space and Femininity in Popular Indian Films in the Post-Liberalized Indian Economy"

Maria Diaconu opened with a presentation on urban femininity as represented by young blogging mothers in the 1990s and early 2000s. Her work responds to Elisabeth Badinter's assertion in *Le conflit: La Femme et la Mere* that returning to the home and choosing motherhood is once more becoming the role of the female. Diaconu used Chris Berry's discussion of "electronic elsewheres" to argue that the internet offers a new space of agency and community for stay-at-home mothers. The internet blurs the boundaries between the domestic and public spheres in a new way, she continued, and these mothers are getting involved in entrepreneurship, politics, and are a particular force in what Diaconu calls the "eco-consumerist movement," buying and marketing "green" products. Diaconu showed a few examples of "mommy blogs," including the very popular www.Dooce.com, and the provocative ladiesagainstfeminism.com, a conservative blog

arguing for a return to nineteenth-century domesticity. In her final remarks, Diaconu concluded that there is definitely a return to domesticity and a reconfiguration of femininity, but that it is not as bleak as Badinter wants us to believe; rather, this a new and evolving femininity. During the Q&A, Diaconu got a question about whether or not she believes the “public and private spheres” still exist. She described how the spheres exist at least in the discourse around these mothers, both in the “old-fashioned” understandings of motherhood and domesticity put forward by Badinter, and in the way many of the “mommy bloggers” express feelings of isolation.

The next presenter, Elizabeth Wilkinson, identified herself as a stay-at-home mother returning to doctoral work. She offered a consideration of the womb as a locus of creation, a particular kind of “technology” that speaks to technological advances of urban spaces in interesting ways. With increasing dependence on commodities—products manufactured for our consumption and use—the world today, she argued, is filled with things beyond our creative power. The womb can be re-envisioned as a place that reclaims individual creation. The womb is a place of hope and aspiration, she said, a place where we can fashion something new. The womb is a neighborhood: a mother is no longer her own, she is a restaurant, a playground, a bus. Wilkinson shared information she collected in a series of interviews with other mothers of her acquaintance, about their experiences with in vitro fertilization, conceiving over the age of 35, and urban vs. rural motherhood. In closing, she offered the womb as both a metaphorical and physical space to re-envision creation, community, and connection. In the Q&A session, Wilkinson got a question about how technology might be forming new creation myths or changing our creation myths. She responded by encouraging everyone to think about what something is that is “alive,” and about what is real and not real.

Fadia Hasan, the final presenter on this panel, took consideration of femininity in a different direction: her work explores femininity as it is presented in popular Indian films. Urban spaces, she says, have been a rapidly growing theme in Indian film, and highlight a particular kind of femininity. Women’s presences in the city consistently mark pleasure and danger. The city is not only dangerous for women, but the presence of women seems to make the city a more dangerous place. Hasan traced the plots of a couple of Hindi language films to demonstrate this trend. She also used these films to point to two recurring feminine archetypes: the polarized “bad woman” (Westernized, career-oriented) and “good woman” (domestic, self-sacrificing). Hasan concluded

by discussing films where women are taking charge and creating more nuanced and positive portrayals of femininity. She says that these are lower budget films that unfortunately do not make it outside of India as easily as bigger budget films. Those bigger budget films, she says, are ultimately what (re)produce stereotypical Indian femininity and discourage deviation from the norm.