

Terminology

In a context such as this Network, which aims to foster cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary discussion and analysis, terminology is a problematic issue and may, in itself, create misunderstandings. As feminist work over the last few decades has shown, 'motherhood', 'mothering' and '(the) maternal' are variously used to describe what mothers do and the relations they have with their children, but they are all ideologically loaded terms. Adrienne Rich's famous splitting of 'motherhood' into 'experience' and 'institution' highlights the gap between, on the one hand, ideologically informed understandings of what mothers should be and do, as determined by dominant discourses, and, on the other, individual women's own experiences of being mothers, which, Rich argues, can subvert the hold of the hegemony of the institution, while nonetheless being impacted by it.¹ Subsequently, the term 'mothering' has become widely used to distinguish individual practices and experiences from the 'institution' or state of motherhood.² The 'maternal', although more encompassing, signalling a site of 'potent intersection between scientific possibilities, psychosocial practices and cultural representations'³ as well as theoretical discourses, arguably carries strong connotations of care that, while not strictly gender-specific,⁴ resonate closely with the notion of the 'maternal instinct' that is associated with Rich's oppressive 'institution of motherhood'. And, of course, even the term 'mother' itself is open to question. What does it mean to mother, to be a mother, in particular circumstances? It might be argued, for example, that increased access to highly developed reproductive technologies in the contemporary period creates a completely new situation in which a child may have several mothers: a genetic mother, a gestational mother and a social mother (who brings up the child). But historical and cross-cultural comparisons reveal that children have been and continue to be mothered in different ways by different people. If parallels can be found, meanings also change, depending on the historical and cultural contexts and according to academic discipline and level of analysis. It is always difficult to continue to use a term while simultaneously also opening it up to interrogation.

In the Network, rather than imposing a single definition, all the above terms may be used at different times to describe a range of experiences, acts and relations. It is expected, however, that those who are presenting work will clarify their terminology, bearing in mind the interdisciplinary, transcultural and broad nature of the audience. Above all, we hope that the literary narratives and representations of mothers that we are privileging will enable a multiplicity of meanings to emerge.

¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985 [1976]).

² See, for example, Andrea O'Reilly (ed.), *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), and O'Reilly (ed.), *Mother Outlaws: Theories and Practices of Empowered Mothering* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2004).

³ Mission statement of the journal *Studies in the Maternal* (MaMSIE: Mapping Maternal Subjectivities, Identities and Ethics/Birkbeck College, University of London), <http://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/about.html> (accessed 23 August 2012).

⁴ See Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Beacon Press 1995 [1989]).