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# Conference “(Hi)stories of American Women: Writings and Rewritings”

Université Toulouse II Le Mirail, October 12-13, 2012

Élise Vallier

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# Conference “(Hi)stories of American Women: Writings and Rewritings”

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- 1 This conference was organized by Professor Anne Stefani (Université Toulouse Le Mirail, CAS) and was presented by the study group on North America GENA (CAS), with the association of the English Department, the DEMA, the Institut des Amériques, the IPEAT, Dickinson College and the Consulate of the United States. This multidisciplinary conference focused on the representations of women in America and on the evolution of these representations in American society and culture (in literature, art, and historiography). The goal of this conference was also to examine the ways women represent(ed) themselves and interpret(ed) the world around them.

## Women on Page and Screen

- 2 On Friday October 11, the conference opened with three papers dedicated to the representation of American women in the arts, cinema and literature.

### **Emmeline Gros (Université de Toulon), “Complicating the Male Gaze and the Representation of Femininity in Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*”**

- 3 Drawing on Laura Mulvey’s 1975 theory—which held that women’s gaze in society is a man’s gaze in disguise—Emmeline Gros explored how the novelist Margaret Mitchell had in fact complicated the gaze in *Gone with the Wind*. At first sight, looking seems to be a male prerogative in the book and the gaze becomes a tool of dominance. Women are the objects of scrutiny in the paternalistic and patriarchal society of the antebellum South. Yet characters such as Scarlett O’Hara successfully manipulate men’s gaze on several occasions throughout the book. Emmeline Gros concluded that gendered relations of power thus appear as reverted on many occasions in the novel. The

questions raised after her presentation dealt with the identity of Mitchell as a feminist, the absence of the question of race in the novel and also how the context in which the author wrote the book affected her writing.

### **Cristelle Maury (Université Toulouse Le Mirail), "*Mildred Pierce: a Novel by James Cain (1941), a Film Noir by Michael Curtiz (1945), a TV Series by Todd Haynes (2010)*"**

- 4 In her paper, Cristelle Maury explored how the eponymous novel has been adapted for the screen since its publication. She not only focused on the distinctive plots, but also on gender roles and class representations. Comparing the novel written by James M. Cain in 1941 to its two subsequent cinematographic adaptations, Cristelle Maury found that the 1945 movie emptied the discourse on Mildred's upward social mobility, and made significant changes by adding a murder to the plot. On top of it, Curtiz offered a glamourized image of Mildred, which seems to be in contradiction with her role as a failed mother. Indeed, Curtiz additionally stressed Mildred's role as a housewife and evacuated the professional sphere in which she was successful. On the contrary, the 2011 series showed working-class oppression in America in the 1930s, showing how Mildred had to fend for herself during the Great Depression. Cristelle Maury underscored that Hayes pushed the viewer to reflect on gender roles. She concluded that from the same narrative basis, all versions proposed divergent gender conventions, which were informed by the period in which the adaptation was made. Obviously, the 2010-2011 crisis-stricken Hollywood version appears as having been more inclined to bring social class issues to the fore.

### **Nathalie Massip (Université de Nice), "*The Elusive Figure of Calamity Jane*"**

- 5 A specialist of the American West, Nathalie Massip considered the several representations of Calamity Jane in American literature and in the motion pictures industry. She underlined that her representation evolved throughout the years and was anything but straightforward. In most movies, Calamity Jane was represented as a "disgrace to womanhood" according to Nathalie Massip. Alternatively portrayed as masculine, or as a "lady," Calamity Jane is depicted in a more nuanced fashion in the later filmography. In the 1950s and 1960s, she was portrayed as gladly accepting to become an occasional drinking partner to Bill Hicock. As Nathalie Massip pointed out, the story of the western heroine is often intertwined with Hicock's. For example, the Musical *Calamity Jane (La Terreur Blonde)* in 1953 presented Calamity Jane as bragging extensively and ordering drinks yet becoming easily tamed and domesticated by the end of the movie. 1990 movies tended to depict Calamity Jane as being masculine yet retaining some feminine attitudes. Perhaps the most faithful or accurate version is the 2004-2006 HBO TV series *Deadwood*, in which Robin Weigert plays an angry, masculine Jane who curses and drinks like a man yet sings lullabies and nurses loved ones at the same time. Achieving a model of dual womanhood, the character of Calamity Jane gains depth and complexity in this version. In this series, Jane, in spite of her love for Hicock, remains independent and resists becoming a "lady." She experiences a sense of loss at her lover's death, mourning a lost western way of life. Nathalie Massip concluded that

Calamity Jane remains a complex and indefinable figure in the history of the American West and in American history.

## Women between Tradition and Modernity

### Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry (Université Paris III), " 'To Speed Our Boys Home... Produce and Conserve. Share and Play Square.' Home Front Propaganda and Food during World War II: Rewriting Gender"

- 6 Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry examined World War II US propaganda through posters, cookbooks and magazines published in 1943 in her presentation entitled " 'To Speed Our Boys Home... Produce and Conserve. Share and Play Square.' Home Front Propaganda and Food during World War II: Rewriting Gender." Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry explored how gender was constructed through war propaganda. She highlighted the fact that one year after the advertisement "Rosie the Riveter", this commercial campaign for food preserves signaled another shift in the depiction of "the American woman." First, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry showed how canning food was presented as an exclusively female activity, thus indicating the increasing responsibility of women during the international conflict. Gender roles being temporarily disrupted, women saw the opportunity of expanding their prerogatives. Women ensured the stability of prices by making informed choices to provide food for their family in times of war. By being in charge of making most of consumers' choices during the war, women started to have an important political role in society. Empowered by this role, they could display organizational qualities. Then, Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry showed how this wartime campaign nevertheless placed the social emphasis on female domesticity, hammering down that home was women's "proper place." As guardians of moral values, they made sure that the American lifestyle was left untouched by the war. The nuclear family represented the backbone of the American social ideal and women were portrayed as the architects of that structure. By systematically presenting women as feminine, caring, selfless and maternal, these advertisements conveyed the idea that the proper role for women was to be at home and not in the workplace. This came in contrast to earlier developments: for instance minority groups—in the absence of white men, gone to fight on the battlefield—had entered the war industry *en masse*, finally obtaining better wages. As Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry pinpointed, all other groups such as minority women or working-class women were silenced and untargeted, absent from the national narrative. Decisively portrayed as a domestic, suburban, middle-class white woman, the American woman in the advertisements offered a narrow version of American womanhood. Hélène Le Dantec-Lowry concluded that this restrictive depiction of "the American woman" forgets women of other racial and social groups. This campaign presented a certain image of (white) American womanhood in a domestic setting. At the end of the presentation, a few questions were asked about regional specificities and the decisions to open kindergartens or daycare in the US during the war, in order to enable mothers to take part in the war effort (a parallel was made with the UK during WW II).

- 7 Jane Bayly (Université de Nantes), "A Day in the Life of the American Woman: Construction and Mediation of the Notion of

## 'American woman' through Photographic Essays"

- 8 Jane Bayly tackled the question of today's representations of "the American woman." Jane Bayly used *A Day in the Life of the American Woman: How We See Ourselves* published in 2005 as her main primary source. First, Jane Bayly recalled the limits of this photographic approach: a photograph being almost always staged, the authenticity of the representations can be challenged. By choosing to include snapshots of everyday life, the authors of the essay created an effect of familiarity but also gave a sense of the "sameness" of the American woman—her universal experience of love and motherhood. In the second part of her presentation, Jane Bayly explained that the celebrated "American womanhood" is a racially diverse group which strives for gender-equality and which is not ageless (one can see old women laughing for instance). In addition, alternative notions of the American family are presented (single parents or same-sex families are photographed). Jane Bayly concluded that this photographic essay gives a more nuanced image of "the American woman" since it celebrates many different identities in terms of age, race and class. Yet as Roland Barthes has argued, "There is no universality." By presenting "an American family of women," the photographic essay evacuates diversity. In fact, Jane Bayly argued that the book somehow ends up reproducing exactly what it is trying to contest, that is, the vision of a monolithic American womanhood, driven by the same wishes for maternal accomplishment for instance. Indeed motherhood—depicted as either "effortless or satisfied"—appears in this book as the pinnacle of womanhood. Yet as recent covers of the *Time* and *The Atlantic* have shown, a harmonious womanhood is still difficult to achieve in America.<sup>1</sup> According to Jane Bayly, gendered social conventions still influence women's lives today.

### Joan Browning (Marshall University, West Virginia, USA) and Patricia Jarvis (United Methodist Church, USA), "*Standing on Holy Ground: Filming the Sacred in the Everyday*"

- 9 The writer, lecturer and former Civil Rights activist Joan Browning explained how she contributed to the realization of a 1972 biographical film commissioned by the Lewisburg United Methodist Church. *Standing on Holy Ground* told the story of Patricia Jarvis—the first woman to become a Methodist Minister in America—and her involvement in her community. Patricia Jarvis has been committed to social justice with her husband, also a Minister. In the 1970s, she worked for two years in run-down areas of Brooklyn, NY, and spent three years in Sierra Leone before returning to the US. For several years, she and her husband served as co-Ministers at Trinity United Methodist Church in Bluefield and Lewisburg, West Virginia. Questions raised at the end of the talk dealt with her position as a woman Minister, gender equality, and the existing contrasts between secular and religion-based societies.

## Women in Black and White

- 10 On Saturday October 12, the last session comprised three papers on American women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### Joan Browning (Marshall University, West Virginia, USA), “White Women in the 1960s Freedom Movement: From Memory to History”

- 11 Joan Browning gave a talk about her experience as a Civil Rights activist in the 1960s US South. A Freedom Rider in Albany, Georgia, in 1961-1962, she was also a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Her consciousness to social and racial problems in America was triggered by her religious experience.<sup>2</sup> In her paper, entitled “White Women in the 1960s Freedom Movement: From Memory to History,” she discussed the process by which she came to pen her story in the book *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement*. She emphasized the importance of race, gender and region by explaining how unusual her position as a southern white woman was at that time. Her presentation illuminated the part both black and white southerners played in the Civil Rights Movement, in their search for racial and social justice.

### Elise Vallier (Université Paris-Est Marne-la-Vallée), “African American Women Evoke their Femininity: A Study of their Personal Writings”

- 12 Elise Vallier presented her work in progress on nineteenth-century African American Women. Her paper entitled “African American Women Evoke their Femininity: A Study of their Personal Writings” drew on diaries, letters and autobiographical writings published between 1865 and the 1920s. Presenting a sample of seven women from both the north and the south of the country, Elise Vallier showed how diverse their definitions of womanhood could be.<sup>3</sup> Elise Vallier first showed that many African American women—northerners and southerners, married or unmarried—were economically self-reliant and psychologically independent. This great independence was often translated in their attitudes towards marriage and motherhood. Indeed, a few women presented in this study rejected the institution of marriage in the post-war years. Most women continued a long tradition of black agency initiated under slavery, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to self-help and “race uplift.” Elise Vallier concluded that despite their distinct regional and class origins, these women organized for racial uplift with the same energy and will. Some became involved by choosing to work in education or in journalism while others got involved in their local religious communities. Perhaps as much as region, class seems to be a relevant factor in the shaping of African American womanhood in nineteenth century America. Questions were raised about the extent to which African American women willingly adhered to Victorian values of “the True Woman.” Additionally, one question was raised about the influence of class above all other factors.

### Hélène Charlery (Université Toulouse Le Mirail), “The Stories of Madam C. J. Walker, a Pioneer of Black American Cosmetics”

- 13 In her paper, Hélène Charlery explored the narratives about Madam Walker, born Sarah Breedlove in children’s books and in the historiography. To this end, she examined three biographies: *The Black Rose: The Dramatic Story of Madam C.J. Walker, the*

*First Black Female Millionaire*, published in 2001 by Tananarive Due, *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker*, published in 2002 by Walker’s descendant A. Leila Bundles, and finally *Her Dream of Dreams: The Rise and Triumph of Madam C.J. Walker* by Beverly Lowry, published in 2004. The daughter of sharecroppers, Madam Walker became the first self-made black woman millionaire by marketing hair products for African Americans thanks to her astute business choices. H  l  ne Charlery underscored that despite similar narrative patterns, these three full-scale biographies possess distinctive features. H  l  ne Charlery concluded that *On Her Own Ground: The Life and Times of Madam C.J. Walker* is the most complete and accurate biography of Walker. It not only provides an insight into Walker’s impressive achievements and personal struggles for social and racial equality but it also shows the self-help and black philanthropy that were characteristic of black women during the Jim Crow era. For instance, Madam C.J. Walker not only supported Ida B. Wells’ struggle against lynching, but also the NAACP as well as various charities throughout her life.

- 14 The organizer Professor Anne Stefani made closing comments on the conference, highlighting the significance of studying gender in American Studies in France and abroad.
- 15 Conference program: <http://ipeat.univ-tlse2.fr/accueil/journee-d-etudes-histoires-de-femmes-americaines-ecritures-et-reecritures--202467.kjsp>

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## NOTES

1. The cover of *Time* in October 2009 entitled “The State of the American Woman: A New Poll Shows Why They Are More Powerful But Less Happy” and *The Atlantic* in July and August 2012 where the headline read: “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All.”
2. She was forced to leave Paine College because she worshipped at a black Church. She is a Methodist.
3. She presented and compared the writings of Elizabeth Johnson Harris, Elizabeth Keckley, Mary Virginia Montgomery, a “negro nurse” who wrote anonymously in a 1912 newspaper, lovers Rebecca Primus and Addie Brown and the activist Ida B. Wells who tirelessly fought against lynching.

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**Th  mes** : Actualit   de la recherche

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