

More for the Fit: Gender and Class in the Representation of Designated Adoption in a Selection of U.S. Television Series

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In recent years, popular cultural representations of assisted reproduction, adoption and surrogacy have multiplied and become almost ubiquitous. As Heléna Ragoné already noted in 2000, “[s]tories of third-party reproduction are routinely found in the media nowadays, and it is fast becoming a familiar and even naturalized aspect of American culture” (2000: 72). Films like *Juno* (2007), *Baby Mama* (2008), *Misconceptions* (2008) or *The Back-up Plan* (2010), as well as television series such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, *Curb your Enthusiasm*, *Spin City* or the short-lived NBC drama *Inconceivable*, have all dealt with these issues in different ways, reflecting a growing awareness of the problem of infertility—mainly as they concern middle-class women or couples and the varied solutions that are on offer to them.¹ The advantages of depicting these questions in the context of light entertainment allow producers and directors to address topical social problems in a way that appeals to a broad audience. While one might see more openness in dealing with issues previously considered taboo as a positive development, some problems nonetheless arise in the ways that these are portrayed. This proves particularly true of the comedic form. Indeed, when jokes relating to these issues profuse—not least in a sitcom—one may be entitled to ask what or who is the butt of the jokes. In this context, I want to show how specific representations of class and gender relations are, in Ragoné’s word, “naturalized”, that is, made to appear natural and commonsensical, as part of the comic depiction of

¹ Not all plots involve heterosexual couples, some, such as *Spin City* and *Brothers and Sisters* involve gay men as the prospective adoptive parents.

designated adoption² in three popular television series—*Sex and the City*, *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives*.³

In looking at these popular representations of designated adoption, I take my cue from Rosalind Gill, who argues in *Gender and the Media* (2007) that “representations matter”, and that the role of feminist analyses of the media consists in making clear the link between on the one hand “images and cultural constructions” and on the other “patterns of inequality, domination and oppression” (2007: 7). Thus, even though the three series I will discuss are all primarily aimed at entertaining, I believe that they are nevertheless revealing in more ways than one might expect about mainstream attitudes to both gender and class. Moreover, the extreme popularity of these shows, both in the U.S. and abroad, makes them a particularly relevant object of study in this respect.

Reproduction, class and ideology

From an intersectional feminist perspective, adoption is by no means an unproblematic issue, often highlighting inequalities of power between different categories of women, rather than promoting global sisterhood. As Laura Woliver for example points out in *The Political Geographies of Pregnancy* (2002): “It is no accident [...] that the flow of adopted children is in one direction: from the less affluent to the more affluent groups within any society, from less affluent countries to the middle and upper classes in more affluent countries, and from minority groups to

² Designated adoption is a specific form of adoption whereby prospective adoptive parents and pregnant birth mothers are paired together even before the child is born, usually through the services of an agency.

³ The material I will focus on consists of three particular storylines: one in *Friends* (*F*), one in *Sex and the City* (*SAC*) and one in *Desperate Housewives* (*DH*). The episodes in question were first broadcast in the U.S. during the period from January 8, 2004 to April 30, 2006. I am aware that the series in question constitute different television genres—*Friends* for example is a situational comedy, or sitcom, while *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* have been characterized as a hybrid form called comedy-drama or dramedy. They do, however, share similar comic elements, not least in the way they deal with the adoption plot.

majority groups in the United States” (2002: 117). This one-way flow suggests that some women’s misfortunes can be others’ opportunities, with all that this entails in terms of a potential scope for exploitation.

The significance of my title—“More *for* the Fit”—deliberately echoes one of the 1920s slogans of the American Birth Control League, which was “More *from* the Fit, Less from the Unfit”, in order to highlight the long-standing inequalities between women in the sphere of reproduction. This slogan reveals the darker side of the early movement for birth control in the United States which, besides advocating more reproductive freedom for some (privileged) women, also supported forms of racial hygiene whereby “the physically and mentally unfit” (Sanger 1919: 10) would be prevented from procreating, thus restricting other women’s control over their own reproduction.⁴ Although racist undertones were prevalent in this debate, class prejudices also featured highly.⁵ My change of preposition from *from* to *for* points, however, to a shift in emphasis in the adoption debate away from the idea of genetic to that of social and material suitability—in other words a form of social rather than racial hygiene—something that I will argue is reflected in the series themselves. The key questions in this context are how the female characters at both ends of the adoption transaction are represented, how they are contrasted with respect to class and what ideological implications this has. Another important aspect I want to look at in this respect is the relation between the mother and her body which, in the context of light entertainment, often turns into an object of ridicule directed at the ignorance of working-class mothers about the functions of their body during pregnancy. Thus, although these television series are obviously meant only to touch upon the issue of adoption lightly and comically, they nevertheless reflect deeper underlying prejudices about both class and gender in present-day U.S. society. It is this ideological subtext that my article seeks to bring to the surface in a more critically informed way, interrogating that which might easily pass as seemingly innocent popular entertainment.

⁴ See Avril (2008) for a discussion of the uneasy relation between the advocacy for birth control and eugenics (170-175).

⁵ See Kevles (2004).

There is of course a recurring debate about what class is and whether it still exists in our postmodern world of apparently unlimited social and economic migration. Class is an especially downplayed issue in the U.S., both in the general debate (Scott and Leonhart 2005) and within critical media studies, where the focus has rather been on representations of race and gender (Casey et al. 2002: 26). Class can be defined along different lines, such as property ownership, occupation, income, but also education, social status and lifestyle. Since the working-class characters in these adoption storylines are typically not well developed, what we learn about them we do primarily through verbal, visual and personality traits. In order to understand the way class figures as a significant unspoken part of the portrayal of adoption in these series, I will examine therefore the symbolic practices used to signify class differentials, such as clothes, taste, sexual habits or intellectual skills. In a medium like the sitcom (in the case of *Friends*), which needs to convey meaning about characters instantly to produce humor and laughter, even a choice of clothes fabric can become an effective signifier of class status. In “The Silenced Majority”, originally published in 1989, Barbara Ehrenreich for example points, to the prevalent middle-class stereotyped association of polyester with the working class (2007: n.p.).

My aim in looking at representations of gender and class in popular media does not stem from a belief that television does or should act as a mirror of society. Nor am I interested in arguing that “real” social relations can unambiguously be identified, measured and then compared to corresponding cultural representations, where the latter might be found wanting. I do, however, subscribe to Stuart Hall’s claim that “the media’s main sphere of operation is the production and transformation of ideologies” (2003: 89) and as such deserves critical scrutiny in order to assess what kind of ideology specific media products either actively promote or unconsciously articulate. One can also define ideology in many ways. Stuart Hall’s characterization in his article “The Whites of their Eyes” (1981) I find particularly elucidating, explaining it as “images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand, and ‘make sense’ of some aspect of social existence” (2003: 89). Ideology here does not stand in opposition to reality, but actually forms our experience of it. In this sense, ideology should also be understood in the plural—ideologies—rather than as a singular, unified entity (2003: 90). It is, however,

important to recognize that not all ideological frameworks carry the same weight. In relation to television for example, a privileged minority within media production possess the power to choose how both themselves and other groups are depicted—represented—for the entertainment of millions of others. As Robert C. Allen and Annette Hill have argued, “[t]elevision not only represents social groups; it also helps to construct and maintain the norms and values through which society is ordered” (2004: 368). This is where the relation between representation, ideology and power comes into play. The audience, while able to resist or contest the dominant ideology through the ways they themselves “interpret,” “understand” or “make sense” of what they watch, nonetheless lack the same possibility to make their own ideologies or worldviews similarly commonsensical or hegemonic. I therefore see media representations of gender and class as performing a specific type of cultural and ideological work, which impacts significantly on the way we understand and relate to the world around us.

Behind the veil of popular entertainment, these series contribute, I would claim, to entrenching caricatures of class, which in the final analysis only serve to justify a hierarchical society in which working-class women (as well as men) should know their place. Moreover, by extension, it is the comic framework of these television series that makes the audience complicit in this ideological denigration of lower class people. The relation between signifying practices and power can be seen as part of the subtext of these television narratives. Moreover, certain signifying practices are connected to underlying ideological assertions, i.e. producing and reproducing power relations. Television is the ultimate mass medium, its capacity for naturalizing the power of patriarchal capitalism for popular consumption is, therefore, not to be underestimated.

I am fully aware, however, that a broader study of audience reception would not only burst the boundaries of my own research concerns; such extended considerations would also complicate my argument, since communication is hardly a one-way street with consumers of media texts gullibly absorbing the message exactly as the producers intended. Stuart Hall for example puts forward the concepts of coding and decoding which involve three audience positions involving dominant, negotiated as well as oppositional readings (1980: 136-138). Given the parameters of my own study, I would nevertheless see myself as representing an

audience viewpoint that is more oppositional. I am therefore interested in interrogating this dominant discourse, or to cite Stuart Hall, in operating within an oppositional position that “detotaliz[es] the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference” (1980: 138). In other words, I see myself as deconstructing the ideological subtext embedded in these television comedies and decoding them within a marxist-feminist intersectional framework. To some, the terms detotalizing/totalizing may of course appear problematic, since they seem to suggest a consistency and stability within the function of ideology, a view that has been seriously undermined by contemporary critics. Nevertheless, I would still claim that Hall’s concept remains useful in that it underscores the subversive possibilities of television criticism, of the political potential of the struggle over signification.

Outward signs of class

Before I move on to discuss the representation of adoption and birth mothers more specifically, let me first briefly introduce the main characters of the series directly concerned with the adoption plot. The three couples involved—Monica and Chandler in *Friends*, Charlotte and Harry in *Sex and the City* and Gabrielle and Carlos in *Desperate Housewives* are all obviously well-off, urban—or suburban in the latter case—heterosexual professionals. Monica and Charlotte are the most traditionally domestic of the female characters in each series, while Gabrielle’s character most often stands out because of her hypersexual femininity and concurrent unbridled consumerism. Not surprisingly, Monica and Charlotte acutely desire and actively try to become mothers to complete their picture of domestic bliss, while Gabrielle is shown previously avoiding motherhood and maternity in order to hold on to her size zero model body. Moreover, prior to the adoption plot, Gabrielle has suffered a miscarriage about which she typically does not seem to grieve, potentially opening up for a different perspective on the issue.

In contrast to the presumptive adoptive parents, the biological parents⁶ in all three series clearly come from a much humbler social background. This is signaled most notably by the clothes worn by the different characters. Dress style functions therefore as a way of immediately conveying meaning through the contrast of sophistication, taste and ultimately class background. These relatively banal signifiers become encoded in the fictional representations, since they refer to something beyond themselves. They conjure up stereotyped images about class, even though the concept of class itself remains otherwise unspoken.

In the final episode of *Sex and the City* for example, Charlotte goes shopping with a view to meeting the birth parents, announcing to the male friend accompanying her that she needs “something *simple* to wear” for the occasion (*SAC* 6.20, my emphasis)⁷—thus alerting the audience to the class-clash that will follow. However, when we do meet the parents, we realize that Charlotte has failed to dress down enough in order to match the couple’s even plainer workaday look, the father donning a combination of denim jacket, denim shirt and denim pants for dinner—denim obviously accomplishing the same function as Ehrenreich’s polyester— in contrast to both Charlotte’s and Harry’s casual but chic outfits. The generally dull blue/gray color of both parents’ outfits, although marking them out, also paradoxically contributes to rendering them invisible, unworthy of attracting either the interest or curiosity of the audience about who they might be, making them no more than a foil to the main characters.

The clothes of Erica—the birth mother in *Friends* —also stand out for their lack of sophistication. Just like the father in *Sex and the City*, Erica wears an outdoor jacket inside in several scenes, signaling not only the fleeting temporariness of her presence in the series, but also the fact that she is clearly out of place in the urban home environment of the main characters. Hairstyles in all three series also serve to mark the different social backgrounds of the characters, with the biological

⁶ We meet the biological father in both *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* but not in *Friends*.

⁷ References to specific episodes will be according to the following model: abbreviated title followed by season and episode number.

mothers often having disheveled and/or dyed blond hair, in contrast to the much more elegant (and dyed) style of the main female protagonists.

In *Desperate Housewives*, the clothes of Libby, the birth mother, additionally indicate promiscuity, reflecting her job as a pole dancer who has to attract male night club clients. However, Gabrielle is not at first contrasted in any superior way to the birth mother. Indeed, another pole dancing friend of the mother at one point compliments Gabrielle on her look, which can either suggest that her style and elegance are noticeable or that her taste is on a par with that of the pole dancers' (*DH* 2.17). Thus, it is only money that differentiates the two women at this stage and not any implicit moral or stylistic superiority. Because of the series' satirical and cynical trademark tone of voice, the treatment of adoption in *Desperate Housewives* brings out the seedier aspects of the baby market and does not seek to idealize the prospective parents. Initially therefore, Gabrielle and Carlos are portrayed as both mercenary and unemotional, only interested in getting the best baby return for their money. The same is true of the Libby, who also reveals her calculating nature from the outset.

While issues of class are more clearly foregrounded in *Desperate Housewives* since the exchange of money for the baby constitutes one of the most important elements in the storyline, the same issues are instead submerged in *Sex and the City* and *Friends* into other social hierarchies, such as regional dichotomies or differences. Much is made for example of the contrast between the urban and rural backgrounds of the characters. This displacement from class to geographical positioning makes the humor much more acceptable, since the audience might be less likely to object to the making fun of the birth mother as a hillbilly rather than as underprivileged.

In *Friends*, we are told, before we even meet her, that the birth mother is from Ohio, a geographical location that appears in comic contrast to the hip, New York setting of Monica's and Chandler's lives. Her country origins are, for instance, made fun of in the episode "The one where Joey speaks French," in which Monica and Erica play a trick on Chandler by suggesting that the baby be given the same name as Erica's father "Jiminy Billy Bob", a typical hillbilly combination which clearly horrifies Chandler (*F* 10.13). Although Erica is the deliverer of the joke, significantly it is Monica who has suggested it, making Erica in fact unwittingly the butt of the joke. The question of course is whether it

is the prejudiced response that gives rise to the collective laughter, or whether the audience is supposed to experience recognition and thus identification with the hillbilly stereotype.⁸

The same New York-centric prejudice is reproduced in *Sex and the City* (the shopping scene previously mentioned) in which the couple who is supposed to give their child to Charlotte and Harry, is found to be from North Carolina. This piece of biographical information spurs a rather cynical comment from Charlotte's male friend, who imagines a TV-dramatization of their adoption story as being about "a stylish socialite couple open[ing] up their Park Avenue home to dumb, toothless yokels" (SAC 6.20). Of course, as with the scene in *Friends* mentioned above, the humor is double-edged. Once again, what seems to be funny is the incongruous image, at the same time as the audience is probably meant to feel slightly outraged by the social arrogance of the suggestion. Charlotte in fact emits a weak reproof by stating that "they are not dumb or toothless", although she does not question the term yokels, which contains the derogatory connotation of being rural and unsophisticated. However, the impression of her moral outrage is later cancelled out by the actual appearance of the North Carolina couple, which is far from flattering. Besides the sartorial stigmatization described earlier, the couple are also shown to be lacking any of the emotional empathy of the upper middle-class couple when they admit that they have suddenly changed their mind about giving up their baby. When Harry asks them why they still chose to come and meet them and put them through all the trauma of disappointed expectations, the father replies simply: "We'd never seen New York". While Harry is clearly upset about such a facile suggestion, Charlotte looks at the couple with an expression of benevolent understanding, in the way you would towards two children. While her smile might indicate sympathy, it also smacks of deep-seated class paternalism, a feeling that could be summed up in the phrase, "forgive them, for they do not know what they do".

The same scene also further accentuates the ignorance and lack of cultural sophistication of the North Carolina couple. Harry for example

⁸ The character played by Amy Poehler in the feature film *Baby Mama* (2008) represents yet another incarnation of the "white trash" cum hillbilly stereotype, complete with the peroxide blonde look.

asks whether “anyone [would] like more ‘lax’” which the bewildered father answers with another question: “Is that the fish?”. The comic effect here could arguably come from Harry’s pompous use of language, which betrays his upper middle-class status, but the sheepish and subservient attitude of the father is what stands out more. Humor also occurs when the birth mother explains she has started to think of a name for the baby: “I like Tiffany, Britney. Wayne says I like any name with an [i:] on the end” (*SAC* 6.20). The line, emphasizing once more the couple’s simple taste, is delivered in the tone of a thick, if somewhat childish, Southern working-class accent, once again stigmatizing regional and class differences. Perhaps then, what was meant to be funny about Charlotte’s friend’s cynical remark was the thrill of daring to laugh at someone “telling it like it is”, unhampered by considerations of political correctness.

All of these character elements correspond to what Barbara Ehrenreich has observed as forming part of the predominant middle-class media representation of the working class as stupid, inarticulate and lacking in taste (2007: n.p.). If we agree with Rosalind Gill that “representations matter” (2007: 7), what then is the significance of these media stereotypes? Of course, comedy cannot exist without some form of caricaturing. Moreover, as mentioned previously, characters, especially in sitcoms, need to be immediately recognizable for the humor to be effective. However, while the use of types (that is the division of people into categories) seems hard to avoid, not all types need be stereotypes (Hall 1997: 257-258). The practice of stereotyping does something besides arranging reality, it “reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall 1997: 258). Stereotypes cannot simply be explained away as “a harmless form of social shorthand: a fast track to recognising the characteristics of a person, group or situation” (Casey et al. 2002: 229). One could in fact argue that such stereotyping practices found in the mass media can be seen as a form of “symbolic violence” (Hall 1997: 259) directed by one privileged group—the men (and women) in charge of production—against the “silenced majority” (Ehrenreich 2007: n.p.) of working-class people.

In what follows, I will look more specifically and critically at these representations and their relation to the ideologies of gender, motherhood and reproduction.

Class, gender and reproduction

One of the main aims of second-wave feminism was to raise women's consciousness and knowledge about their own bodies. In the portrayal of Erica in *Friends*, one can surmise that working-class women have remained unaffected by feminist struggles or discourse. Indeed, although Erica is the one carrying the child, she has no awareness whatsoever of the workings of her body, something around which a significant part of the comedy of the episodes centers. Thus, much of the humor in the plot line is linked to Erica's hair-raisingly limited understanding of what is happening to her physically. This constitutes one more aspect that divides biological mother and prospective adoptive mother and another way to bring into relief the contrast between the two women's relative social competence, not least in the crucial task of raising children. The most striking example in this respect appears in the episode entitled "The one with Rachel's going away party" in which Erica comes back from a trip to the city⁹ with pains in her stomach. Replying to the question whether she is alright, Erica says "Yeah, you know, maybe I ate too much. I keep getting these stomach aches. They come and go like every few minutes." Monica, together with the audience (but not Chandler), understands straight away what is going on: Monica and Phoebe exchange knowing looks in a show of (middle-class) female complicity, before Monica explains with great agitation: "She doesn't have a stomach ache, she's in labor!" (*F* 10.16), confirming to us that Erica needs someone to interpret the language of her body for her. It is also revealing to note here the use of the third-person pronoun 'she', which reifies Erica as an object and distances her further from her own body. This scene ends farcically with Monica completing her displacement of the birth mother by taking the seat she previously occupied and miming the process of labor herself by falsely hyperventilating and covering her own tummy as if it were she who was giving birth to the baby.

While we are clearly supposed to laugh at Monica's over-the-top reaction, the scene also serves to destabilize the meaning attached to the pregnant body and to detach the connection of motherhood from the

⁹ Just as in *Sex and the City*, visiting New York seems a really attractive bonus for biological mothers considering adoption.

biological mother—thus signifying that Erica is no more than a vessel. Since Monica can read the physical signs but Erica cannot, the former thereby rightfully assumes the role of mother in the eyes of the audience. After all, we have already been assured by Chandler in the episode where they meet Erica for the first time that Monica is “loving and devoted and caring [...] A mother without a baby” (*F* 10.9), implying that Erica, even though pregnant, is clearly not to be mistaken for a mother.

Similarly, Erica’s doubts about the identity of her baby’s father also constitute a sign of her incompetence both as a woman and as a mother. Although Chandler and Monica are for a while worried that the father of their future child might be a young man who Erica had sex with and who is now in prison for killing his father with a shovel, Monica finally reassures Chandler by explaining to him why it could not have been the aptly nicknamed Shovely Joe:

Monica: Well, it turns out that Erica didn’t pay much attention in Sex Ed class, because the thing she did with that prison guy... it’d be pretty hard to make a baby that way

Chandler: Oh God! What was it? The thing that we hardly ever do or the thing we *never* do?

Monica: The thing we never do

To which Chandler smiles and nods in a knowing way, pronouncing the name “Shovely Joe” with certain admiration (*F* 10.13). The comment leaves it to the imagination of the audience to decide whether the reference to the daring sexual habits of the lovers involves fellatio or anal intercourse. Without doubt, the nickname “Shovely Joe” is also inscribed by images of working-class and rurality. Shovel is the tool of a laborer, also suggesting connotations of dirt or perhaps even shit. The popular expression “shoveling shit” would also tie in with the allusion to anal sex. Besides revealing Erica’s dumb-founded ignorance, the humor of this scene also draws on the opposition between two different images of masculinities that are contrasted by class, not least the idea, dear for instance to D.H. Lawrence, that the working class are less sexually inhibited than the middle class. Chandler is for a moment somewhat in awe of a man who can get what he wants from a woman sexually—it is doubtless Monica who sets the limits to their sexual activities. The other side of the coin, however, is the connotation of working-class animality and primitivism. This is a trope that goes back much further than

Lawrence of course, already present in the Victorian period in Britain when the urban poor were demonized as being sexually promiscuous and brutalized by their life in the slums.¹⁰ Another aspect to this stereotype was the suggestion of the unbridled fertility of working-class and rural people, which was contrasted to the sexual abstemiousness or even sterility of urban and upper-middle-class people—something also evident in Lawrence's portrayal of the aristocratic Clifford Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. In *Friends*, it is also suggested by Chandler that he is unable to give Monica a child and that Erica is not only allowing Monica to become a mother, but also for him to become a real man.

The sexual element of the *Friends* episode further underpins other aspects of social prejudice by indicating that although less privileged economically, working-class men possess certain patriarchal privileges—that of not having to deal with feministically conscious women who refuse to serve men sexually in any way they like. At the same time, it also reveals yet another difference between Erica and Monica, where the latter appears as more liberated from a feminist standpoint in that she asserts her own bodily integrity in her sexual relations with Chandler. In contrast, Erica seems uncaring of her body, unreflecting about the ways in which it is used either sexually or reproductively.

Yet another example of Erica's lack of connection with her body is the fact that she is unwittingly about to give birth to twins (*F* 10.17-18). The information she is given during pregnancy of the existence of two heartbeats she misinterprets as being that of her own and that of the baby. Thus, once again her body seems to have a life of its own about which she is only vaguely aware.¹¹ It also gives rise to another scene that serves to define Monica as a “natural” mother in contrast to Erica, when she

¹⁰ See for example Barret-Ducrocq's discussion of the predominant characterization of the laboring classes in terms of their loose sexual morality, something that was seen as a threat to the social order (1991: 2) or Pia Laskar's study of the interactions of categories of class, race and gender in the construction of a normative heterosexuality in the nineteenth century (2007: 44-64).

¹¹ *Baby Mama* makes similar use of such plot elements when Angie (Amy Poehler) believes that she is faking her pregnancy while being unaware that she really is pregnant.

objects to Chandler's doubts about what to do with the second child by claiming: "They are our children!". The birth and adoption of two babies is thus quickly accommodated by Monica, who cannot conceive of the possibility of giving up the other child, thus signaling her sense of responsibility as a middle-class mother who will take care of both babies. The corresponding lack of impact on Erica seems merely to emphasize her fecundity, rather than her maternal feelings. Abundant and effortless fertility is also associated with the birth mother in *Desperate Housewives*, whose labor is over before Gabrielle and Carlos even arrive at the hospital. Her only comment is: "The kid just slipped right out" (*DH* 2.18), almost like an evacuation. In this case, however, the prolificacy of the working class is sanctioned only when it serves the purposes of the middle class. Their bodies are objectified as vessels that produce what is required to fulfill the lives of the middle-class couples.

Just as in *Friends*, reproductive capacity is contrasted to maternal feeling in *Desperate Housewives*. While Gabrielle is hardly represented as an ideal mother, her character traits are clearly enhanced by the short time she spends mothering her adopted baby. Although she delegates most of the daily maternal tasks to her maid Xiao Mei, the last scene of episode 20 shows Gabrielle heart-broken and almost hysterical, as any good mother would be, at having to give up the child. This image appears in stark contradiction to that of the scantily-dressed biological mother, who cursorily announces that since her boyfriend is now off drugs, they have decided to "give the family thing a go" (*DH* 2.20). Magically, the maternal instinct in Gabrielle has had time to kick in, despite all expectations and she suddenly appears as a much more caring parent compared to, in her own words, "the white trash freak show" (*DH* 2.18) that are the biological parents.

Assisted reproduction and feminism

Most certainly, these representations of the issue of adoption in all three series are not unilaterally conventional or conservative. As I have noted, they can sometimes be seen to incorporate aspects of the rhetoric of feminism. If one considers the stigma attached to infertility among women for example, the increasing number of female characters who personify the problem in television and films can perhaps be interpreted as a positive step forward. Indeed, as Christine Ward Gailey argues, not

only birth mothers but also adoptive mothers have usually been thought of as unnatural in the popular imagination, the former because she voluntarily relinquishes her child, the latter because of her “failed womanhood” (2000: 19). These depictions of women unable (or unwilling as in the case of Gabrielle) to give birth to their own children reduce their stigmatization, as well as undermining the dichotomy between nature and culture when it comes to motherhood. However, it is also significant to note that the removal of the stigma for one category of infertile, upper middle-class women, does not translate to lower-class women, who are either seen contemplating or indeed actually relinquishing their children. The former category of middle-class women thus project culture in opposition to the other lower-class women’s nature, a binary where culture is clearly valued higher. Class in this context is, moreover, the pivot around which the contrast of nature/culture is articulated. This shows how the gains for some women in terms of representation are not automatically transferred to other categories of women.

In relation to the birth mothers, one could also argue that the series (especially *Friends*, since it is the only one where the birth mother actually gives away her child as promised to the adoptive parents) help to debunk the myth of a maternal instinct, this latter being another long-standing feminist point of debate. First-wave feminist activist and theorist Charlotte Perkins Gilman for example conceptually divorced maternity from motherhood, claiming that the physical experience of pregnancy and birth did not necessarily make a woman a mother. In this way, she sought both to subvert received ideas about maternal instinct, as well as re-value the function of childcare in society.¹² However, the birth mothers are clearly not the ones with whom the television viewers are meant to identify. Instead, it is the middle-class women who re-inscribe motherhood as the crowning achievement of a woman’s life who are meant to deserve our admiration. Indeed, although the series rehabilitate women suffering from infertility, they do not question the compulsory nature of motherhood, at least for middle-class women.

¹² See Avril (2008), 135-163.

Seen from a marxist-feminist perspective, one could also argue that the references to payment or rewards for the birth mothers (cash, trips to New York, hotel and mini-bar expenditure, etc.) in connection with the adoption process undermine the sharp distinction usually made between the spheres of production and reproduction. When a price can be put on reproductive labor, it effectively shows that “women’s labour in pregnancy and childbirth has potential market value, and that it is indeed productive labour” (Dickenson 2001: 209).¹³ It is significant in this respect that the stigma attached to the birth mothers is not linked to them being pregnant but to their lack of emotional and intellectual capacities. This is in line with the fact that in today’s reproductive market, these women are seen to possess valuable commodities that can become the objects of exchange. This was not always the case however, as Mary Shanley explains: “During the first two decades of the twentieth century, women who bore a child outside of marriage was considered a ‘fallen woman,’ shamefully weak or immoral” (2001: 16). The stigma attached to unmarried white mothers gradually lessened as they were encouraged to relinquish their child for adoption. This did not extend to black mothers, however, as white offspring was valued higher than that of other women in the reproductive market (Shanley 2001: 16-17; McElroy 2002: 332)—something evident also in the series themselves.

This materialist connection between reproduction, production and consumption is most emphasized in *Desperate Housewives*, something that fits well in with the general consumerist lifestyle depicted in the series. The question of adoption introduced by the voice-over of the narrator represents Gabrielle as a voracious shopper who does not settle for anything but the best, even when the latest product she desires is a live baby. That the baby is a commodity is made clear from the beginning and later re-inforced by the attitude of the birth mother who sees it as an opportunity for money (*DH* 2.17). The adoption storyline in *Sex and the City* is, in contrast, marginal to the rest of the episode, which focuses primarily on Carrie Bradshaw’s peregrinations in Paris. We learn

¹³ This should not be understood as inherently positive however, since as Dickenson argues, the needs of reproduction remain subordinated to the needs of production, rather than the other way around. It also potentially expands the scope of exploitation of women’s reproductive labor (2001: 213).

therefore very little about the actual reasons why the birth parents consider giving their child away. However, as I have discussed above, the birth parents' sightseeing trip to New York can be interpreted as a form of economic exchange. Their moral reprehensibility is also compounded by them taking material advantage of the situation, while failing to fulfill their own end of the adoption bargain.

Insofar as she delivers the goods, Erica is the least morally questionable of the three birth mothers. While this can be explained in terms of the sitcom genre itself (Erica deciding to keep her child would be hard to turn into unadulterated comedy), it nonetheless results in her regaining some of her dignity through serving a higher maternal purpose. She may be a simpleton but she knows her place and her obligation of usefulness to the middle class.

A consideration of a liberal feminist standpoint, in which notions of the individual and of choice are paramount, can also point to another interesting element regarding the series' portrayal of adoption. As with surrogacy, adoption involves a legal contract whereby one woman signs away her parental rights to someone else. A key liberal argument in defense of surrogacy contracts, and of their legal enforceability, is that to deny a woman's right to enter into such a contract and limit her obligation to fulfill it would imply that women "are not competent, by virtue of their biological sex, to act as rational, moral agents regarding their reproductive activity" (Shalev quoted in Shanley 2001: 106)—an image of women that feminists would of course not want to promulgate. In the series under discussion, the portrayals of birth mothers appear somewhat contradictory in this respect. In order for the audience to accept the fact that birth mothers would give up their children, they have to be seen making an informed choice as rational human beings. The birth mother in *Desperate Housewives* for example justifies her choice to have her baby adopted both through the imposition on her job and the appeal of financial gain. Although cast as morally dubious, the mother still makes a choice, she is not brow-beaten or driven by desperation into doing it. At the same time, in order for the audience fully to support the child transaction, they have to be made to appear less competent than the prospective adoptive mothers. The portrayal of Erica in *Friends* is particularly revealing in this respect. As discussed above, for most of the time she appears on screen, Erica is depicted as a simpleton. The first episode in which she figures, where she chooses the adoptive parents for

her baby, offers, however, a striking contrast, since it is Chandler and especially Monica who we are meant to be critical of,¹⁴ while Erica behaves much more rationally in discussing their suitability as parents. When she comes to New York, however, it is revealing to see her transformation into the naïve country bumpkin who shows a risible level of ignorance about her own pregnant body. If Erica had been consistently portrayed as an idiot, this would have created an element of moral doubt about the issue of adoption, as Monica and Chandler could have been seen as exploiting a vulnerable and powerless woman. Instead they somehow manage to convince us that Erica both made an informed choice and yet is comically unaware and incompetent.

Thus, although the birth mother's choice to give up her child on delivery needs to be cast in some positive light for it not to reflect badly on the adoptive parents (as is the case in *Friends*), a dichotomy becomes inevitable between on the one hand "fit reproducers" (or at least fit enough) and "fit mothers" (Corea, Hanmer et al. 1987: 9). In other words, women as mothers are split "into two related, largely rival entities: the 'legitimate' and the 'unnatural' mother" (Mc Elroy 2002: 326).

Just as the motto of the American Birth Control League in the early twentieth century used to be "more from the fit, less from the unfit," there is a certain eugenic ring to this contemporary representation of designated adoption in the television series I have been discussing, but with a twist. Indeed, eugenics is perhaps not the right term here, since what is at stake is not the genetic pool of the child and of its birth parents,¹⁵ but the social class and status of the adoptive parents. As a

¹⁴ Monica and Chandler are initially compromised in that they lie to the birth mother about who they are in order to get her child, passing respectively as a priest and a doctor. The dilemma is however resolved before the episode's conclusion, where the adoptive couple is re-established as being worthy of receiving the child.

¹⁵ This element forms, however, a significant part of the humor both in *Friends* and *Desperate Housewives*. Indeed the whole "Shovely Joe" episode in *Friends* is about ensuring that the father of Erica's child is the college kid and not the guy in prison for killing his father. In *Desperate Housewives*, Gabrielle rejects

result, the expression “less [for] the unfit” does not suggest, as the original expression once did, that working-class people should be discouraged from procreating. It could almost be seen as promoting the opposite, since the babies of underprivileged fertile (white) mothers can become valuable exchange products on the market. However, the particular mothering skills of wealthy women are most certainly portrayed as being more desirable, and thus more fitting in with the ideal of the bourgeois nuclear family. Indeed, as I have pointed out, much of the comic element is based on the contrast between working-class birth mothers who show little indication of maternal feeling and capacity and the much more suitably responsible and financially secure middle-class couples. These representations thus drive a wedge between different categories of women, as some female characters’ perspective is legitimized and naturalized, while others are marginalized or vilified. In the final analysis, motherhood is constructed in these series as a middle-class prerogative, which is translated in both material and moral terms and is thus significantly revealing of both gender and class prejudices.

Conclusion

My discussion of the narrative elements of these three television series has been informed by a critical desire to challenge some of the implicit ideological suppositions about gender and class that these episodes contain. In this work of deconstruction, an overriding pattern has emerged about the nature of popular television. Ultimately, as Richard Butsch has pointed out, one finds that “[s]trewn across our mass media are portrayals of class that justify class relations of modern capitalism” (2003: 575). In the specific context of these series, the depiction of adoption constructs a dichotomy of images between a working class that appears only good enough to procreate and a middle class that is clearly better suited to taking on the task of bringing up baby.

Of course, television viewers might certainly interpret or make sense of these shows very differently, not least depending on their own class

several birth mothers for their lack of good looks as she does not want to inherit an ugly baby.

and gender positioning. The ideological articulation of reproduction, class and gender found in these storylines might not achieve hegemonic status, since they might in fact be actively resisted or adapted. In this respect, it is perhaps also significant to note that the adoption plot lines appear in the very last season of both *Friends* and *Sex and the City* and are eventually resolved in the final episode, tying up all the loose ends. The formation of a nuclear family with a baby in *Friends* adds a constructed element of closure to the show that appears in complete opposition to the condition of singlehood and tight-knit friendships which defined the previous ten-long-year existence of the series. In this feel-good ending of *Friends*, Monica and Chandler have also purchased a suburban home which, together with having a child, Chandler describes as a sign of their finally “growing up” (*F* 10.10). This however also signals their growing out of the framework narrative of the television screen. Although the formation of a nuclear family is presented as a crowning achievement, it remains nonetheless narratively marginalized, lacking either in sufficient audience drawing power or comic potential.¹⁶

As I have tried to show, the concept of class, while remaining an elusive element in the critical debate, still offers powerful analytical possibilities to explore what is going on below the surface of popular television series. In fiction as well as in reality, class constitutes one of those “shadowy lines that still divide” (Scott and Leonhart 2005), not least in relation to reproductive labor, be it biological or social. In the treatment of adoption in television series, however, this complex issue, still fraught by class and gender tensions, has been made the subject of light entertainment that aims to leave the audience with no troubling afterthoughts. But perhaps, when all is said and done, that is the ultimate ideological function of mainstream popular cultural representations.

¹⁶ Interestingly, the other children are almost totally absent from the series. Ben, Ross’ son in *Friends*, is brought up by his ex-wife and her female partner and rarely appears on screen. Rachel and Ross’s daughter Emma remains similarly anonymous.

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