

**Veronique Olivier**  
**Chapman University**  
**Colette and Motherhood as Language**

When I was a doctoral student in Madison, Wisconsin, my thesis director was a 32-year-old professor, living in Boston, Mass., where her husband held an important job. Pregnant with their first child, she commuted between Boston and Madison each week, grappled with morning sickness, got tenure and shortly after, Juliet, her first, was born. When we got to know each other better, my professor sometimes mentioned the kid but more often, seemed more enthusiastic about her students. When I teach my French women writers and directors' course I ask my students: Did my professor wish to have children? Is childbearing -still- a societal expectation or, as 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau claimed, are women defined exclusively by being mothers?

In this paper, I am interested in French author Colette, whose 150th birth is celebrated this year. One of Colette's most important writings is *Sido*, dedicated to her loving mother who did not hesitate to wake up little Colette at 3 am so that they could witness the sunrise. *Sido*, the mother, nourishes Colette's sensual, corporal, writing, a point I see as capital to understanding the paradoxical dynamic of motherhood. After becoming a mother herself, at the age of 40, Colette continues to self-doubt her maternal instinct and refuses to believe that motherhood fulfills a woman's life. She rarely lives close to her daughter Bel-Gazou and yet, they exchange more than five hundred letters. I will show that Colette is less concerned about the politics of motherhood, about the dynamic between femininity and motherhood than she is about the language, the act of writing. Colette's letters and novels, act as the ultimate interest -and I will content, as problematic- in exploring the role of motherhood. As a result of writing a chapter on Balzac's representation of women as mothers in *Memories of Two Young Married Women*, my dissertation involved motherhood in France. Since becoming a professor, I regularly teach a course titled *French Women writers and directors as leaders* (FR386). Among the many questions this course addresses are the status of female writers and directors' cinematic and literary discourses on motherhood (Agnès Varda, Simone de Beauvoir, Colette). This semester I am teaching a new course called *Images of Childhood in French literature, Culture and Film* (Fr309) in which the politics of motherhood is explored through the reading of French philosopher's Elizabeth Badinter's *History of Maternal Love* as well as the semi-fictional book by Marie Darrieussecq titled *Le bébé* (the Baby). In addition, an exchange with University of Caen students (April 7-16, 2023) includes those questions. In that respect, I am directing a Senior thesis on *The Status of Motherhood in France in 2023*. A junior student, Francesca Hill, is creating a questionnaire about the desire and challenges of becoming a parent that she will use during the Caen/Chapman exchange to poll francophone future parents or young parents.